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MAY '45
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SHORT STORIES
NOVELETTE

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RR—1M

STREET & SMITH'S
Romantic Range

CONTENTS

MAY, 1945 VOL. XX, NO. 1

CONTINUED NOVELS

WHAT THEN, SEÑOR REDHEAD? *by Isabel Stewart Way* 6
In Two Parts—Part I

DAUGHTER OF THE WEST, *by Richard Hill Wilkinson* 88
In Four Parts—Conclusion

NOVELETTES AND SHORT STORIES

HUMANS ARE FUNNY, *by R. R. Meredith* . . 21

CRAZY OVER HORSES, *by Kenneth Fowler* . . 33

THREE SISTERS AT THE WALKING K, *by Kingsley Moses* 46

TWO-LEGGED LOBO, *by Scott Ellsworth* . . . 73

EXIT THE KID, *by Beatrice Shaw Chapel* . . . 100

PHIL ANSCO, RUSTLER, *by Lytle Shannon* . . 106

FEATURES

THE LARIAT OF LOVE, *by Shawn Arlow* . . 120

"LET'S PLAY CHECKERS!" *by Millard Hopper* 128

VERSE

DESERT LILIES, *by Lela M. Willhite* 32

DAWN ON THE SALT FLATS, *by Thelma Ireland* 72

SCARLET TANAGER, *by Isabel Forner Weddon* . 105

COVER: Joan Leslie featured in Warner Bros. "Hollywood Canteen."

Editor
DAISY BACON

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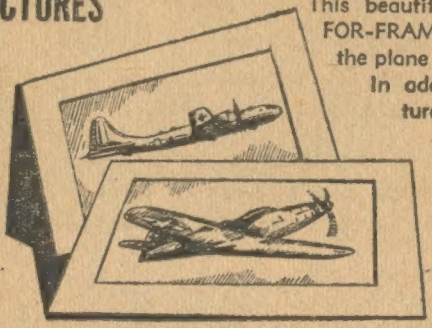

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WHAT THEN, SEÑOR REDHEAD?

by Isabel Stewart Way

I.

For a week the great herd of the Don Fernando Aguilar had been held in the valley that sloped away from the rambling adobe ranch-house. For a week the vagrant breezes had rumbled with the sound of their bellowing, and the dust of their hoofs had risen, a gray sun-shot haze, toward the hills. Even in the heat of the day, in siesta time, they moved about restlessly.

From her window, Manuela could watch her grandfather's herd. She had explained that often this past week, to Tia Rita, when the big woman had complained of her standing at the window so much.

"It is such a huge herd, Tia Rita!" Manuela would exclaim. "Never have I seen so many cattle together. They make the very earth to shake! A most magnificent sight!"

Always, Tia Rita threw up her hands. "Dust and noise and a constant movement that wearies the

A Two-part Novel—Part I

eye. I will be glad when they start northward! Did they stay longer, your complexion would of a sureness be ruined by the dust, and your eyes made old by straining to see them."

Manuela dimpled now as she knelt before the deep-set window and looked out over the valley. The cattle were a noble sight, indeed, but quite as dusty as Tia Rita had said. One could grow tired of watching them. But, on the other hand, one could also watch the trail that led out from the pueblo of the angels, and that wasn't tiresome. Not when you remembered that a red-headed *Americano* was apt to ride over it at any time, even at siesta as now.

"That brash one!" she said, remembering Patrick Dennis Callahan, who paid no heed to the frowns of a duenna, nor to anything else that would keep him from catching a few words alone with a girl.

The very first time he'd come to ask for the job of driving her grandfather's steers to San Francisco, he'd seen Manuela and stopped talking, making it necessary for her grandfather to introduce them. And there had been something in his blue eyes that had made Manuela smile back warmly for which she'd been scolded roundly, afterward, by Tia Rita.

The don had told Patrick Callahan, that first day, that he was sending his great-nephew, Felipe Barbosa, as major-domo of the drive, but Patrick kept coming back to see if the don had changed his mind, and each time he'd managed somehow to see Manuela. The last time he had firmly placed Tia Rita in a chair and told her to rest herself while he talked with Manuela by the patio fountain.

Remembering Tia Rita's face, Manuela laughed aloud. From the next room came a sharp protest.

"Manuela!" Tia Rita called out. "Must you be of such a restlessness? All this siesta time you have been wakeful and I would rest."

Manuela jumped up and went to the door, a slim figure with shining dark hair like a shawl to her waist. "How can you want to rest?" she demanded. "How can you keep your thoughts from the excitement of tonight?" For the Rancho El Mirador was holding fiesta, celebrating the leaving of the herd at dawn.

Since before dawn a steer and two muttons had been roasting in the barbecue pit, and savory pungent sauces had simmered all day, filling the world with luscious odors. A band of *musicos* had been brought down from Monterey to furnish music for the dancing which would last till break of day, when everyone would go to see Padre Pablo bless the herd and start it off.

It was a mighty venture, this cattle drive. The don's father had raised his cattle for the hide and tallow, which he sold to the ships that lay offshore. Two years ago, Don Fernando had sold many hundred for what the gringos called four dollars a head. Now, since the finding of gold had brought a rush of outsiders to California, cattle brought the fabulous price of fifty dollars each, American money, so Don Fernando's *vanqueros* had

combed the many arroyos and hillsides of the great ranch, and as many as four thousand head would start for the San Francisco market tomorrow. A good reason to hold fiesta.

"How can you stay so quiet, *tia mia?*" Manuela repeated, her dark eyes two great pools of excitement.

"I rest, because there will be much weariness before tomorrow," her aunt returned practically. "And for thee, *chiquita*"—the round face gave a sly smile—"there will be tears. With my son Felipe, thy betrothed one, gone with the cattle, thou shalt be filled with loneliness and grief."

Manuela started to speak, then turned back into her bedroom. For there were things she couldn't tell Tia Rita, that it would be a relief, for instance, to have Felipe gone for a few days, where his soft voice, pleading for an early marriage, couldn't trouble her ears.

It was hard, at times, to remember that she was betrothed to Felipe, even though she'd always known that some day Felipe would be her husband. It had been exciting to have her grandfather announce the betrothal at her last birthday *baile* —she'd been sixteen but of late she'd tried to put the whole thing out of her mind. Especially since Patrick Dennis Callahan had come to the ranch.

Manuela's face was dreamy as she walked to the window. Then suddenly, her eyes widened and, heedless of the midday heat, she threw open the shutters to see it better, the cloud of dust coming over the trail from the pueblo.

Whirling, she slipped on her dress hastily, her shoes, began brushing the dusky cloud of her hair. Then she tiptoed across to Tia Rita's door to make sure she was asleep, went out on the gallery, across the patio and through the gate, just as Patrick Dennis Callahan drew to a stop there, under a smoky olive tree.

"Oh!" Manuela made her voice sound disappointed. "It is only you! I thought it was Padre Pablo!"

Patrick Dennis Callahan swung down from the saddle, stood there, grinning inpudently, and Manuela wondered why she always felt so excited when he came near. He wasn't handsome, surely. He didn't have Felipe's grace, nor Felipe's beautiful olive-skinned features and sleek black hair. Patrick Callahan was so tall he looked lanky. His face was too bony and as bronzed as an Indian's, and his flaming red hair was rumpled to a thousand unruly tight curls. His eyes were as blue as lupine blossoms, and they were sparkling with a sort of mocking mischief as he drawled out:

"Since when has the good padre taken to ridin' a stallion? And why would he come at siesta time? Is somebody here needin' the last rites?"

Manuela's cheeks flushed with anger. That always seemed to come, too, along with the excitement of seeing Patrick. "What right have you to question my intelligence?" she blazed. "Most certainly, had I known it was you, I

would have stayed asleep. The padre—once when his mule was sick, he borrowed a horse, a stallion, and came! And, most certainly, I knew that nobody else had the right to come riding in and waking us all from siesta!"

"Did I honestly wake you, Manuela?" The mischief was still in his eyes. "Or were you watchin' for me?"

She gasped in her fury, "Watching for you? I, Manuela? Señor, if I should call my grandfather and tell him what you have just said, he would have you lashed with whips off the *rancho!*"

He kept grinning. "And you, what would you be doin' while they were lashin' me with whips, little wild cat?"

Manuela's hands clasped tight together. "Wild cat?" she echoed fiercely. "I'll have you know, señor, that in all California there is no wood dove so gentle as I. I'll have you know—"

She stopped, for all at once the mocking mischief had left the man's face. He said, "I don't mean to hurt you, Manuela. It's just—you're so doggoned cute. I had to come, to make sure you'd dance with me tonight."

"Tonight?" she echoed, startled. "You mean, you're coming to the ball?" For while all the neighbors and kin had been invited, most certainly Don Fernando Aguilar had included no Americans from the pueblo of the angels. "You're coming here?"

"I'm here now." He chuckled. "I've got a message from Padre Pablo to your grandpop, and after I give that—well, the don'll just have to ask me to stay for the shindig, won't he? At least"—his blue eyes were again filled with laughter—"that's what the padre thought."

Manuela laughed, thinking of the big priest who sometimes stooped, delightfully, to worldliness. There was the time she'd caught him by the cock pen, his eyes shining, his face eager as he watched, unknown to the peons, the finish of a good match, before he chided the men for their gambling sins.

He had smiled sheepishly then and sighed, "Ah, little one! Sometimes the man hidden under the priest's robes craves still the adventure this old world offers! If only the two could be more often combined, the office of doing good and the excitement of victory after a good fight!"

And now he'd connived to have Patrick Callahan invited to the fiesta, for, according to the laws of hospitality, her grandfather could do no less. Manuela lowered her long lashes.

"I hope the good padre is not ill?"

"Not a bit of it! He'll be here and he'll be expectin' to see us dance together. You're sorta lookin' forward to it, Manuela, just as I am?"

Manuela felt, all at once, as if she'd taken too many sips of her grandfather's very old wine, all breathless and excited. Then she looked up at Pat, saw the wide, sure-of-himself grin on his bony face, and the anger was back again.

She lifted her dark head high. "If my grandfather invites you, señor, I will of a necessity dance with you. Even uninvited guests have their rights at our *rancho*."

There was silence as they stood there in the shadow of the patio wall, looking at each other. The creaking of the gate broke that silence, and they turned, saw Felipe Barbosa, Manuela's cousin and fiancé come out to stand before them, slim, dark and utterly handsome, with his sleek black hair and perfect, olive-skinned features.

Felipe's dark eyes rested on Manuela a moment, then he turned to Pat, frowning. "You have business, I suppose, that you disturb the señorita in her siesta?"

He spoke imperiously, but Pat merely shrugged. "I have a message for Don Fernando Aguilar."

"From whom?"

Pat's eyebrow quirked in an amused way. "Your hearing must be bad, fella. I said the message is for the don!"

But Manuela saw the glinting of those blue eyes as they swept Felipe's arrogant figure. She saw, too, the storm-filled face of Felipe, knew a clash was in the swift making. And that would mean the ousting of Patrick Callahan with no invitation for tonight's fiesta, and the good padre disappointed.

"I repeat, señor," Felipe said softly, "I will take the message."

"And I repeat"—Patrick's voice was like a lash— "that—"

"Wait!" Manuela broke in quickly, "I hear my grandfather calling to Benito! Siesta time is over. Come into the patio, señor, and wait by the fountain. The don is not too feeble to hear your important message himself!" She flashed Felipe a defiant glance before she led Pat through the gate inside the walled patio, where a thousand blooms spread their sweet scent upon the air, and where signs of life told that siesta was indeed over.

Don Fernando came forward, as straight and handsome as Felipe, in spite of his thick white hair. He looked puzzled as Pat gravely gave him the message. "The padre has a christening which will delay him, but he wished you to know that he will be here tonight."

"I never doubted it!" the don exclaimed. "The padre has not missed a fiesta since one can recall! But I am grateful, señor, and"—he paused dramatically, let his gaze flick toward Manuela, then back to Pat —"we would have you remain also for our fiesta!"

Patrick Dennis Callahan looked the don in the eyes and his manner was as courteous as the older man's. "Thank you, sir. I am deeply honored to be your guest," and Manuela knew a queer pride when she saw the respect that lighted her grandfather's eyes.

The fiesta was a success.

When the mountains cast the first cool evening shadows across the valley, the guests began assembling.

Padre Pablo came, not too late, after all, and his kind dark eyes twinkled whenever they met Manuela's, though he was finding joy, as always, in the feasting and the en-

tertainment—music and singing, as well as dancing by young *Mexicanos* and *Inditas.*

Brown-skinned Benito Lopez, born and raised on El Mirador, gave the dance of the shoemaker, stamping out the tap of the shoemaker's hammer as vigorously as if he were not a grandfather of four.

Manuela called out mischievously, "Pick yourself a partner, Benito, and give us the *jarabe!*"

Benito flashed white teeth, let his dark eyes scan the gayly dressed girls. Then a shrill voice broke the silence, as Manuela had expected, "Ha! I weel dance weeth you, thou roving-eyed son of a mule! I, thy wife, Ana Lopez!" and a short mountain of flesh moved purposefully forward.

There was laughter, for the whole valley knew of Ana's jealousy. There were a few teasing shouts, "Tomorrow you leave on the cattle drive, Benito, and will be out of her sight!" and "That's right, watch him, Ana! He's a gay one with the señoritas, that Benito!"

Then the laughter stopped for the music had started and the couple began their dance. Many times had this same crowd seen Benito and Ana do the *jarabe,* and as always, it held them spellbound. For despite the huge body that made Ana waddle like a duck when she walked, she danced as lightly as a fluff of down on the breeze.

A soft voice spoke at Manuela's ear. "Poor Ana. The days ahead will be hard, with her Benito gone from her side."

She looked up at Felipe, shrugged. "Perhaps."

Felipe went on, "I hope, Manuela, that you will miss me. For, of a certainty, I shall be lonely for you. Only the thought of our marriage, right after my return, will sustain!" He moved very close to her.

Manuela looked expectantly at Tia Rita. A good duenna, now, would frown at such open display of ardor, but to Tia Rita her son could do no harm.

"There'll be time to talk of marriage when you return," she said shortly.

Felipe's face tightened as he looked at her. "One might think, Manuela, that marriage was of little interest to you. Is it that you would live as an unloved, unhonored spinster? Or is it"—he leaned still closer until his lips were at her ear—"is it that other things have distracted you? A red-headed gringo, for instance, who undoubtedly laughs in the pueblo about the easy conquest he has made."

Manuela leaped to her feet, dark eyes flashing. Words choked her, but before she could get them past her lips, she saw the curious glances of others upon her.

Her head went up proudly and she applauded as Benito and Ana ended their dance. "Bravo!" She laughed gayly. "Now give us music that we may know the joy of dancing ourselves! And you, Señor Callahan!" Driven by an imp of recklessness and daring, she smiled at Patrick, who sat with a group of older men. "Is it the nature of the *Americano* always to

After her grandfather had announced her approaching marriage to Felipe, Manuela looked across at Patrick Callahan, saw his face go gray under the red hair, saw the fury in his eyes.

speak of cattle and the dangers of the trail? Or can he perhaps lose himself in the dance, and forget?"

He leaped to his feet, strode over to her, his red head seeming to tower higher than ever into the air. "It depends on what you want me to forget," he said, low, and his bold glance brought a warm surge of color to her cheeks.

Manuela was conscious that Tia Rita had straightened up from her drowsiness, mouth open, to speak to her sharply, but just then the music started, gay music that was like a key winding a spring so tautly it could be unloosed only by dancing.

Other young couples began dancing, too, but Manuela was conscious only of Pat, his arm discreetly about her, his hand clasping hers. Of Pat, looking down at her with mischievous, laughing blue eyes.

Then came his voice, drawling softly, "Know somethin', Manuela? This dancin' business, it's better for rememberin' how cute a little dark-eyed señorita can be." Then, his mood suddenly changing, "Gosh, I wish my sister could know you!"

"You have a sister?" Somehow, she hadn't imagined this *Americano* as part of a family.

"Four of 'em. Noreen is my twin. She's up in Oregon now. A red-headed little moppet who knew what she wanted and went after it." He chuckled. "Reckon I should say, knew who she wanted and went after him."

"Oh!" breathed Manuela, suddenly confused.

She didn't talk any more for a time. Probably she didn't think, either, just gave herself over to the music and the rhythm. Perhaps that was why she didn't realize what Pat was doing, until she found herself off the hard-packed ground where they'd been dancing, walking with him over the moon shadows made by the leaves of a great fig tree.

She looked up at Pat, started to tell him Tia Rita would be angry, but somehow, when she met his gaze, it all seemed foolish, the things a duenna wouldn't like. Pat's sister had undoubtedly refused to heed the advice of any older woman. So Manuela walked with Pat in silence until they came from under the fig tree and stood on the crest of the hill overlooking the valley where Don Fernando's great herd was held.

They could see them down there, a mighty shadow that was made up of some four thousand smaller shadows, and, circling slowly about them, the mounted *vaqueros* huddled over their saddles.

"What a sight that will be when they start movin'!" Pat said fervently.

Manuela's head went high. "You will miss the sight of them, no doubt, those beasts of my grandfather. It's very strange, señor, how the thoughts of the *Americano* keep always to cattle. Cattle and gold."

There was silence again, broken by Pat's sudden chuckle. He caught Manuela's arms, turned her to face him. "So you think my mind's only on cattle, do you?

That I've been ridin' out here just to see your grandpop's herd? Well, you're wrong, honey." A great gentleness crept into his voice. "And I think you know it."

"Señor!" She tried to put anger into her tones, but she couldn't. It would be like robbing the night of the moonlight that shimmered, a golden mist, or putting harshness into the song of the mockingbird that trilled from the fig tree. On a softer note she repeated, "Señor! A . . . a Spanish girl dares not know such things. She . . . she has to be told, señor."

"You darling!" Pat's voice was like music. "Manuela, it's been cruel never to have you alone, yet now, when we are alone, I can't think of words to tell you—"

"Si, señor!"

"How much I love you, Manuela!" The words came on a breath. "From the first, darlin'."

A whispered, *"Si, señor,"* and a silence as throbbing as the mockingbird's song. Slowly, as if afraid he might break some spell, Pat's arms slipped about Manuela, then, with a great quickness they tightened, bringing Manuela close against his heart, and his lips were against her own.

At times, in the past, Manuela had wondered what it would be like, to be kissed ardently. She'd tried, daringly, to imagine it, but none of her dreams ever had been anything like this, she thought fleetingly. She hadn't known that it would be a bandit, this first kiss, robbing her of everything familiar, making her feel as if she belonged to this man, and him only.

"You love me, Manuela?" he asked. "This isn't just a dream?"

"Si, señor," she said for the third time, breathlessly.

Another silence, while Pat stroked the dark hair back from her face. Then he said, "Well, the next thing, darlin', is to break the news to your grandpop."

"What?" she gasped, and the spell was broken. She drew away from Pat, vexed that he had brought it all back, the thing she didn't like to remember. "Are you crazy?"—vehemently. "Can you not see we must wait?"

"Why?" He was scowling.

She stood speechless. Deep within, some instinct warned her that it would be wise to tell Pat about Felipe, but it was also instinct that made her draw closer to Pat, look up at him from under the long silken lashes.

"We cannot hurry these things, Pat. My grandfather—if we should trouble him now, while he has the cattle on his mind, he would be angered. Never would he give his consent. He might even" —there were tears on the lashes now, for Manuela had grown expert in getting her own way, through the years of wheedling the don—"send me to a convent. Or keep me from seeing you. He'd break my very heart, Pat."

Pat's eyes glowed fiercely as he caught her in his arms again. "Nobody'll break your heart while I'm around. We'll wait if we have to. Only, I don't like hidin' things, darlin'. I don't take it well

from others, their tryin' to fool me, and I don't aim to do it myself."

Manuela didn't answer. Her figure went suddenly tense, from listening. Over in the shadows she'd heard a sound like a foot stepping on a twig. As swiftly as a quail slipping through the grass, she moved out of Pat's arms. She laughed.

"And now, Señor Callahan, since you have seen my grandfather's herd at night, we must return. Tia Rita will be troubled at my absence, and I have an apology to make to my cousin Felipe for teasing him so wickedly."

Pat's jaw dropped a little. Before he could speak, Manuela's eyes had discerned the outlines of a figure moving over there in the dimness. Felipe! Fear clutched at her for an instant. If Felipe had seen her in Pat's arms, there'd be wild havoc any minute. Moreover, there'd be the truth flung at Pat.

"Good night, Señor Callahan!" she said quickly, and turned. Her cry of surprise when she bumped into Felipe, back in the shadows, was very real.

"Ah, it is you!" she exclaimed. "How fortunate! Now you can take me back and keep Tita Rita from being angry!"

Felipe's voice had lost its softness. "Should she not be angry, you coming out here with the gringo?"

Manuela shrugged. "To see the cattle by moonlight? Surely, even a duenna could not object to that? Anyway," she added, "it was all your fault. You had no right, Felipe, to make me angry, so angry that I could not stop and think!"

Felipe spread his hands helplessly, then escorted her back to the tables, all cleared now, and with the dancing still going on. Leaving her with Tia Rita, Felipe bowed, excused himself and moved slowly toward Don Fernando, and again Manuela knew fear.

Then she saw Pat at the edge of the crowd, and she dismissed Felipe with a shrug. If her cousin had seen her in Pat's arms, he'd have been so furious he couldn't have hidden it. Anyway, the music was enchanting, and there was the stirring memory of Pat's arms about her, of his kiss. And there was Pat himself, watching her as she danced with another cousin. And the fact that Pat looked slightly bewildered, slightly vexed, dimmed Manuela's pleasure not a bit! That had been her method of managing the menfolks of her family, keeping them always bewildered and a little vexed.

When this dance was ended, she would flash Pat a single glance from under her dark lashes, and he would come to claim her for the next. He might not do it in just the way Tia Rita would approve, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered right now to Manuela, who was a bit intoxicated by the music, the dancing, and the memory of a kiss.

She was just ready to flash the glance, and a smile, at Pat when her grandfather's voice sounded, loud and impelling. She turned to see the don standing on a small knoll,

a resplendent figure in his coin-trimmed black velvet, his great dark eyes and snow-white hair.

"Amigos!" he said, when quiet came. "This fiesta, it is to make double celebration that we are here. The going of the cattle to the new market which may prepare the trail for many more herds. And also for the bigger thing. I would have you celebrate, *mis amigos"*—impressively—"the fact that soon, this very month, my granddaughter Manuela and her cousin, Felipe Barbosa, will be united in marriage!"

II.

There was an instant when the very world seemed to stop its motion, while Manuela looked across the crowd at Patrick Callahan. She saw his face go gray under the flaming red hair, saw the blaze in his blue eyes. Her hand came up a little, and was caught in a tight grasp. Turning mutely, she saw Felipe, and in his dark eyes she read the truth. He had seen her and Pat together, and had told her grandfather. There was a sudden sternness on the don's face when her desperate gaze flicked to him.

That sternness kept her from crying out, "It's a lie! I will marry my gringo, not Felipe!" The menfolks of her family felt she had done wrong, and were taking this way to right everything. If she refused to accept it, for the time being, they might do worse—to Pat.

So she stood beside Felipe, with the crowd pressing upon them, laughing, chatting, giving their congratulations. The don came over to stand on the other side of her, and Manuela felt as if she were in the midst of a whirling emptiness, a daze in which only one thing stood out, the blazing contempt in Pat's eyes.

Through the haze she heard somebody say, "But this marriage—will Felipe return from San Francisco so quickly?"

"The marriage will take place as soon as the padre can publish the banns," the don returned blandly. "For Felipe is not to be major domo of the drive, after all! I have been overcome by the pleas of the young betrothed couple who do not wish to be separated for even so short a time. As for my cattle"—he looked toward Pat, raised his voice—"they will be taken north by a more experienced man. Señor Patrick Callahan, who has long desired the pleasure!"

Again Manuela looked at Pat, and this time anger steadied her. For there was hostility in his eyes now—hostility, accusation and blazing contempt.

She held her head high through the rest of the congratulations. She kept it high as she danced with Felipe, and only he saw the fire that lay in her eyes.

He smiled his triumph. "You are beautiful, my Manuela, even when you are angered."

"Would I seem more beautiful to you, Felipe," she asked tensely, "were I to claw into your face

again, as I feel like doing now?"

His smile faded and he looked uneasy, for Felipe had had experience, through their childhood, of Manuela's storms. He said, "It is the wish of your grandfather, Manuela."

"It was yours! You told him that . . . that—"

"That I saw you holding outrageous flirtation with the gringo!" he finished. "After all, *querida,* am I not thy betrothed?"—lapsing tenderly into the more familiar idiom. "Surely, we have been more than generous, the don and I, not to have killed this man for his forwardness."

Manuela was silent, her throat tight with fear. For the first time in her life she felt unsure, helpless. Only one thing she knew—she was going to marry the *Americano.*

It would mean careful planning, in her own way. A way that always worked. Her smile was confident as she lifted her head, veiled her anger by only half-raising the long lashes. *"Si,* you have been generous not to have killed Señor Redhead, but also, you have been discreet. He is big, that señor, and very strong."

Felipe's face flushed, and Manuela felt happy again with things once more on the old familiar basis. The next time Pat danced with her, she'd tell him to be patient till she had worked out a plan. Maybe he wouldn't wait. Maybe he'd catch her up and run away with her, and if so—well, Manuela felt all the happier.

But Pat didn't come to dance with her. Pat went back to the older men, to talk of the drive, and dance after dance went by, with Manuela having as partner almost every man on the *rancho,* except the one she wanted.

Her dark eyes were stormy as she met Padre Pablo. "Why does Señor Callahan not dance with me?" she demanded. "You caused him to be invited, yet he stays away from the dancing!"

"Perhaps he has what he wants from El Mirador," the padre observed mildly. "He has long desired this chance to go to San Francisco, and a wonderful opportunity it is! The days on the trail, perhaps even the fighting. Sometimes the *Inditas,* those who have still stayed savages, swarm down from the mountains, and—"

Manuela eyed him severely. "And at the end of the trail, the wicked Barbary Coast!" And with that, she whirled away from him, and into the dance again.

It was Manuela who managed that the end of the next dance found her close to Patrick Callahan. Then, even though Felipe was coming toward her to claim the next dance, she looked at Pat.

"Si, señor! It is indeed your dance, this next one!"

The next moment was the longest in her whole life, for Pat didn't move. He just stared, his face tightened. Manuela's hands clenched in the folds of her full ruffled white skirt. If he dared refuse—

But even a redhead like Patrick

Callahan dared not go that far. With a bow he came over to her, took her politely in his arms, just as the music started again.

He danced without talking. When their glances met, his blue eyes were still hostile. Precious moments passed, until at last she said tensely, "How dare you be this way? Can you not know that I had nothing to do with it? Felipe saw me in your arms, and he told my grandfather. That is why he made the announcement."

Pat's blue eyes weren't quite so cold. "You mean then, Manuela, that you do love me, enough to be my wife?" he asked.

"Si, señor!" she whispered, and she laughed up at him.

"They just used that engagement as a ruse to get me out of the country with the cattle then, hopin' I'd not come back! You weren't promised to that Felipe at all?"

"Well," Manuela evaded, "they always wanted us to wed. But I hadn't met you then, Señor Redhead!"

He grinned suddenly. "If you just knew the hell I've been through these last couple hours, honey. Lovin' you so, thinkin' you fooled me."

"Girls can't always help themselves, Pat," she told him gravely. "With men as they are, sometimes girls have to do a little what you call fooling to get their way. They have no other way to fight, as you men have."

"No?" Again that eyebrow quirked and he chuckled. "Some girls find a way. My sister did."

"Tell me, Pat, of your sister!"

"Well, Noreen and a boy back home were planning to get married. Then they quarreled, and without ever tryin' to make up, George joined a wagon train headed for Oregon. That was two years ago, when Noreen was just nineteen."

"How terrible for Noreen!" Manuela exclaimed. "What did she do?"

"Do? She packed and followed him to Kansas City, where the wagon trains took off, but George had gone on. So she waited till another train left, headed for California and gold, and traveling fast, and she joined up on the slim chance of overtaking the Oregon train."

"Did she find her George?"

"Sure. And married him, when they got to Laramie and a parson. They live up in Oregon now. So you see"—his eyes still laughing—"that's why I know girls don't have to take roundabout ways. You won't ever try to fool me, will you, darlin'?"

The music stopped, and Pat's face grew grave as he looked down into her face. "I'd like your promise on that, Manuela."

And then, before she could get the words past her suddenly dry lips, old Dona Cruz Pico, sitting at the edge of the dancing, glanced up and saw Manuela. Twisting her wrinkled face to a smile, the old woman spoke shrilly:

"Thou certainly keepest us dancing, *chiquita!* There is tonight, and so soon shall we again dance for thy wedding! And it

seems but yesterday that we celebrated thy betrothal to Felipe at a magnificent *baille!"*

"Si, señora," Manuela murmured, then, seeing the storm clouds gathering on Pat's face again, she caught his arm, drew him hastily into the shadows again. Such a brash one as this gringo, he might even spill out in speech before the others.

"Pat, you must listen," she began. "I—"

"Why," Pat broke in scornfully, "should I listen to lies?"

"Señor!" Manuela blazed. "How dare you say I lie?"

There was no merriment to Pat's laugh. "You've done nothing else. You were engaged to this Felipe, yet you never told me. You let me love you, and you belongin' to another man! You— Oh, what's the use? You'd never understand!"

She was trembling as she stood there. "Pat, it was all the truth, that I love you. What else matters?"

To her eyes, straining through the darkness, it seemed as if his face softened. She moved closer, ready to take advantage.

"You are the one I would wed, *querida,* the one I must wed. If only you will be patient, give me a chance to think of something, something I can tell my grandfather—"

He gave a low exclamation of anger, moved away from her.

"You needn't do any more connivin' on my account," he said roughly. "I'm through. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last girl left in the country, not even at the point of a gun! As for love"—his voice was contemptuous—"marriages have been arranged for you girls so long that you don't know how to love! All you know is to think up ways to lead your menfolks around by the nose, and that doesn't go with me. I'll say 'good-by' now," he added grimly, "for good."

He strode away into the darkness, and Manuela just stood there, trying to hang onto her anger as she watched. It would be easier that way—a person thoroughly angry couldn't feel anything else. Not even a pain in the heart, such as she had now.

But there was no anger great enough, nor fierce enough, in all the world, to dull that throbbing ache. Manuela could only move mechanically through the rest of that night, dancing, smiling, pretending to listen. The older folks, who watched, marveled at her lack of weariness and envied her.

And, in turn, Manuela vaguely envied the old ones. They wouldn't have to go on living indefinitely.

But for her, there would be only life and remembrance. Memories of a red-headed man who would ride out of our life as boldly as he had come into it. Gone forever, and carrying her heart with him.

"And what then, Señor Redhead?" she whispered of the night air. But there was no answer.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

No jasper could twice tell Aime to go jump in the river—and be the same afterward.

HUMANS ARE FUNNY

by R. R. Meredith

THE trouble was that Roger Powers wouldn't allow himself to be patronized. Not that Aime intended to be patronizing. Such a thought never entered her mind. Her original purpose had been to be entertaining and polite, as her father had requested.

"The boy's a tenderfoot," Ed Sanders had explained. "He's never been West before, and it's up to us to see that he's properly entertained."

"Why?" Aime asked. She had had an instinctive dislike for Easterners ever since one of the dudes from the Welcome U outfit had come upon her fishing in Hawkins River one day and had kissed her. She'd had to push the guy into the river before he'd let her alone.

"Because," her father carefully explained, "Roger's father and I were boyhood friends. Charlie went East when he was twenty and made a lot of money." The old man cleared his throat. "Charlie staked me when I wrote him that I wanted to start a horse ranch."

"I see," Aime murmured. She was a pretty girl with blond hair, brown eyes and a stubborn chin. "When is this . . . er . . . Roger arriving?"

"Tomorrow. He's staying at the

Welcome U, but I've written Charlie that we'll expect him to make our Flying S his home as often as he likes." The old man gave his daughter an anxious look. "You be nice to him, eh, Aime?"

"Of course I will, dad." Aime kissed her father's leathery cheek. He was such a swell old codger. "I'll make him wish his father had stayed out here where men are men and women are glad of it."

And she almost did, too. Her intentions were certainly of the best. She was a Westerner with a vast love for the country in which she lived. She promised herself to remember that Roger Powers was a tenderfoot, and to be considerate in her attitude toward him.

But, somehow, they got off to a wrong start.

Roger arrived two days later. Aime and her father were having lunch on the ranchhouse veranda.

You could tell that he was a dude a mile away. He sat stiff and erect on his horse. He wore dude clothes —whipcord riding breeches, a white shirt open at the throat, brown riding boots of soft brown leather. And, worst of all, he was using an English saddle.

"Must be Roger," old Ed muttered, and went down the steps. Aime followed him.

Even then, though she didn't realize it, there was a growing resentment in her. Probably it was the English saddle. And the fact that Mr. Powers was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on didn't help matters any. He had an infectious grin, too. She never had met anyone so self-possessed, so sure of himself.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Sanders. Dad's told me so much about this place that I almost feel I'd been here before." His glance moved about the ranch yard in a pleased sort of way, and finally came to rest upon Aime standing at the foot of the steps. "Well!" He began to grin. "Dad didn't say that the scenery would include anything like this."

Yes, thinking about it later, Aime decided that it was then that the thing had started. She got the impression that Roger Powers felt that she should be thrilled because he noticed her. His eyes, his expression, said, louder than words, "Maybe my stay out here isn't going to be as dull as I thought. Here's something to amuse me, and what a lucky break it is for her."

Not that he put it into words. He was polite, almost formal. He accepted their invitation to have lunch with them, and courteously answered all old Ed's questions about his father.

"Charlie's done all right for himself," Ed mused, his eyes proud. "Best part of him is he don't forget his old friends. Why, when I wrote him for a loan to start this here horse ranch, he sent it without question. Wouldn't even take my note."

Roger made no reply to this. Modestly, he dropped his eyes, stirring his coffee. Aime felt the hot blood rush into her cheeks. Why in the world couldn't her father

keep quiet? My lands, to hear him talk, you'd think that Charlie Powers had kept them from starving. You'd think he owned the Flying S. You'd think they had never repaid the loan with six percent interest money.

Old Ed sighed deeply, noticing nothing amiss with either his young guest or his daughter.

"Aime, why don't you saddle up your chestnut and ride with Roger for a spell? Show him the country. Like that, would you, Roger?"

"I think that would be fine," Roger said.

And because it wouldn't have been good manners to refuse, Aime nodded and got her hat and jacket. Roger walked with her down to the corral where her chestnut and several other horses stood watching them with pricked forward ears.

"Which one is yours?" Roger asked matter-of-factly.

Before Aime thought, she answered, "The chestnut with the bald face and the three white stockings."

"O. K.," said Roger. "Wait here."

Aime was so astonished that she could only stand still and gape. He actually intended to rope and saddle the chestnut. Well, for heaven's sake! That was certainly funny. All her life she had been saddling her own horses, and now this Easterner— Momentarily, her resentment gave way to amusement. Let him try it! He'd find out soon enough that you couldn't just do things like that without being an old hand. Maybe back East the horses —

She stopped thinking and stared. Roger Powers had entered the corral, lifted a saddle and bridle from the fence and was approaching the chestnut without a rope. She could hear him talking softly to the animal. And to Aime's amazement and secret disgust, the chestnut didn't fling up its head and shy away as was its habit. It stood docile while Roger slipped the bridle over its head and flung the saddle across its back.

"I've seen cowboys scare a horse by trying to rope it first," he explained a moment later, as he led the chestnut through the corral gate. "Shall I give you a hand up?"

"Of course not!" Aime said sharply. She vaulted easily into the saddle, mad clear through. The chestnut, she figured, was either sick or had been too surprised to shy.

But neither proved to be the case. It developed that the chestnut was feeling unusually spry. In fact, she had trouble keeping him down. And Roger Powers rode along easily in his English saddle, making matters worse by being solicitous. He made several suggestions about how to handle the animal. My lands, who did he think he was? She was so mad that she deliberately pricked the chestnut with her spurs and then held it in check so it would appear that she really was having a lot of trouble. She'd

show this dude a thing or two about riding!

After about an hour, Roger suggested, "I think he wants to run. Why don't you let him out for a spell?"

Aime was on the point of making some tart reply when she suddenly realized that they had come down onto Mesa Flats. The flats was a five-mile-wide stretch of country as level as a pool of water. Midway across it was a narrow gully running in a jagged course. In the spring this gully was filled with water from the melting snows on the mountains, but now it was almost completely dry, its banks still oozy with mud.

Aime's mouth formed in a straight line. The gully was invisible because of the foot-high bunch grass that covered the flats' floor. A horse familiar with the terrain could jump it easily, but a strange horse and a strange rider—What better way to teach this upstart of an Easterner a lesson?

"Race you across the flats!" she cried, and dug home the spurs.

"Done!" yelled Roger. She heard the sudden swift beat of hoofbeats behind her and bent low over the chestnut. The thing to do was pretend to be riding hard, but let the dude think he was winning so that he'd reach the gully first.

Much to her annoyance, she found, after the first fifty yards, that she had to use every ounce of horsemanship at her command to coax enough speed out of the chestnut to keep anywhere near the dude.

Roger's black gelding had forged ahead, apparently with little effort. The dude was looking back over his shoulder, grinning and shouting encouragement. Aime ground her teeth. Darn him! What was the matter with the chestnut, anyway?

Savagely, she dug in the spurs. The chestnut gathered itself for a renewed burst of speed. Just then, she heard a yell and looked up.

Momentarily, she had forgotten the gully. Now her eyes flew wide open. She almost screamed. Roger's black had reached the edge of the gully and without seeming to even break its stride, went sailing across it, landing on the other side with room to spare. Roger yelled excitedly.

Then the awful thing happened. So intent was Aime on watching what she hoped would be the dude's downfall, that she neglected to gather the chestnut for its leap until too late. Not that she didn't cross the gully. She did, but without the chestnut. The animal came to one of those suddenly horselike stops on the very rim of the gully, and Aime kept going.

She landed with a jarring thud in the mud and grass on the opposite side.

"Hurt?" Roger Powers was kneeling beside her, his expression anxious.

"Of course I'm not hurt!" Aime stormed, getting to her feet, rubbing herself. "I've been thrown from a horse before. I've been thrown a hundred times. A girl

who's lived on a ranch all her life, who was practically born in the saddle, certainly knows how to be thrown from a horse without getting hurt."

It sounded silly, and Aime certainly looked silly. Her face was spattered with mud. Her hat had fallen off. Her hair was awry and there were tears of frustration in her eyes.

Roger Powers began to laugh. He couldn't help it. He laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Be still!" Aime screamed at him. "Stop it! You sound like an . . . an idiot! Stop that silly laughter."

Roger stopped. He looked at her gravely, but his eyes were twinkling.

"I wish," he said, "you'd stop rubbing yourself. It's embarrassing."

And Aime, suddenly realizing where she was rubbing herself, prayed mightily that the ground would open up and swallow her.

It was a bad beginning all right. It grew worse as time passed. Roger appeared at the Flying S every day. He pretended that he came to call on old Ed as well as old Ed's daughter, but half the time Ed was away and Aime had to entertain the dude.

It made her furious. She suspected that Roger knew that her father had instructed her to be nice to the son of his oldest friend, and that he was taking advantage of the situation. He was so superior, so sure of himself. Without appearing to do so, he deprecated all her efforts to show off her abilities and knowledge of ranch life.

And the maddening thing was, there was always the suggestion of a twinkle in his eyes, as though he were secretly amused by every attempt she made to impress him.

When a girl is twenty-one and pretty, when she is sought after by half the young swains in the countryside, she has her dignity to think about. She can't afford to become an object of amusement.

And so, without realizing it, Aime became obsessed with the idea of revenge. The one thing that she now lived for was to bring this arrogant young man to his knees, to show him that he'd made a mistake when he decided to amuse himself at her expense.

It was humiliating when all her attempts failed.

Heartlessly, she inveigled Roger into riding an outlaw bronco. Much to her chagrin, Roger wasn't thrown on his ear as she hoped. He rode the animal to a standstill.

"I hope your father won't mind because I gave one of his blooded mares such a work-out," he apologized innocently, after the feat was accomplished.

Aime was so mad she couldn't speak. Just yesterday Tommy Farrell, her father's top rider, had been pitched from the mare's heaving back.

Two days later, Aime tried to give the dude a scare by pretending to be lost when they had ridden farther from the ranch than usual.

"You couldn't be lost with a better man," Roger grinned at her. "But don't worry. I'll get you home. Folks would talk if they knew we'd spent the night together out in these hills. Things like that are important to a woman."

And he led the way home as truly as though they were following a compass course.

"I don't know," Aime told him with biting sarcasm, "how I ever survived in this land before you arrived, Mr. Powers."

"That's been worrying me, too," Roger admitted. He studied her a moment. "Maybe I can fix even that." For once he wasn't grinning, but any particular significance that the words might have had were completely lost upon Aime.

The next day, Tex Menkin appeared at the ranch. Tex Menkin had been in love with her once. But lately he'd been drinking heavily, and old Ed had forbidden him the ranch, much to Aime's relief. There was something about the man that frightened her.

Today, as usual, he was drunk. He half fell out of his saddle and came up onto the veranda where Aime was reading.

Aime rose in some alarm. She was alone on the ranch. Her father and the boys had ridden away early that morning to do some branding.

"Tex," she said, "you shouldn't have come here. You know when dad gives an order he means it."

"Your old man ain't givin' me no orders. No one's telling Tex Menkin what to do."

He lolled against one of the veranda posts and leered at her. Aime had the uncomfortable feeling that he wasn't as drunk as he wanted her to think.

"What do you want?" she asked, keeping her voice calm.

"Same thing I always wanted when I came to see you, baby. Useta be glad to see me then. Useta lead me on. Useta want me around. Well, no dame can treat Tex Menkin like that. Me, I don't like to be shoved around, see?"

He half stumbled, half lunged toward her. Aime stepped back with a little gasp. She mustn't appear frightened. Perhaps she could talk the man into leaving the ranch. Perhaps—

Suddenly, she found herself with her back to the side of the house. There was a chair on her right. To the left was the open door that led to the living room. If she could reach it before—

Tex Menkin's eyes narrowed craftily. Aime saw the look and leaped toward the door. Menkin gave a throaty laugh and also leaped. His hand closed about the girl's wrist and jerked her back.

"Not so fast, chicken. There was a time when you didn't run away from me. I ain't no different now than I was then. Want me to prove it?"

He bent her wrist slightly. Aime uttered a suppressed scream and took an involuntary step forward. Menkin laughed and thrust forward his face.

Just then a voice said, "All right, cowboy. Let the lady go."

Tex Menkin whirled with an

Powers hit Menkin once, a good solid, chin-shattering blow. "Get out now!" he ordered. "Get on your horse and scram."

oath. Standing at the head of the veranda steps, was Roger Powers. His expression was grim.

"I said, let the lady go!" Roger repeated sharply.

"Oh, you did?" Tex Menkin thrust out his jaw in an ugly gesture. "And just who the hell are you to order me around, fancy pants?"

Aime wanted to scream, to shout a warning, to yell at Roger to run while he had the chance. Tex was a head taller than the Easterner. He outweighed him by a good fifty pounds. And he had a reputation for brutality in a fight, especially if his opponent was smaller than himself.

But Aime's throat was suddenly paralyzed. She couldn't speak.

Menkin was advancing upon Roger. His elbows were crooked, and his ham-sized hands were extended in a clawlike gesture. When he was a few paces away he stopped, crouched, ripped out an oath and suddenly sprang forward, his arms flaying the air.

Aime closed her eyes. She heard a grunt of surprise, followed by a clattering series of thumps. She opened her eyes. Tex Menkin was lying sprawled on the ground at the foot of the steps. There was no doubt but that he had tumbled down the steps.

Roger Powers went down the steps, seized a handful of Menkin's shirt and jerked him to his feet.

"Some people," the dude remarked without humor, "have to learn manners the hard way." And he hit Menkin once, a good solid, chin-shattering blow. Menkin collapsed like a dropped banana skin.

Roger nudged him with his boot. "Get out!" he snapped. "Climb on your horse and scram. Quick!"

Menkin obeyed. He hitched himself along the ground till he was well away from Roger, then got groggily to his feet. Blood dripped from his mouth. There was a scared look in his eyes.

Seconds later, he had climbed into his saddle and was spurring his pinto out of the yard.

Roger Powers turned and looked at Aime bleakly.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't encourage men to make love to you unless you're prepared to take the consequences." He strode away.

Aime lay awake half the night staring into the darkness of her room. It was warm, but beneath the blankets she was trembling.

Gray dawn had tinged the eastern horizon when she came to her decision. Somehow, she had to make Roger Powers understand. Even if it meant humbling herself, she had to convince him that he had been wrong in his estimate of her.

She didn't stop to wonder at the thing or ask herself why. She just knew that it had to be done, no matter what the cost. It was a matter of pride, or perhaps something that went deeper, something which had happened to her and she didn't understand.

Toward midmorning of the next day, Aime rode her chestnut around

a bend in the trail that led to the Welcome U dude outfit, and almost collided with two people who were standing there. One of the two was Roger Powers. The other was a slim, dark-haired girl. They were locked in close embrace, their lips pressed together.

Aime was so surprised that, for a moment, she just sat still in her saddle and stared. Sound of her approached had startled the pair. They drew apart. Roger Powers looked up at the girl on the horse. For a moment, he merely returned her shocked stare. Then his lips parted in a grin.

"Well, hello!" he said.

Aime never knew whether she answered him or not. But, suddenly, her vision was blurred. She knew that she had jerked the chestnut around. The next memory that was clear in her mind was that she was thundering along the trail in the direction from which she had come. Her body felt numb and cold.

She had progressed perhaps a hundred yards when she became aware of a sound behind her. She turned to look. Roger Powers, astride his black, was galloping in close pursuit.

Aime pressed her lips together. A gleam came into her eyes. So he was going to overtake her and laugh at her again, was he? He hadn't humiliated her enough. The fact that he practically had ruined her life hadn't satisfied him.

With a savage jerk on the reins, she sent the chestnut plunging into the thick brush that lined the trail. Her hat was instantly torn off. Branches struck her stingingly across the face. A thorn caught the sleeve of her flannel shirt and ripped it from shoulder to waist.

But she kept spurring on the chestnut. And the animal responded nobly. They broke through into a clearing, galloped across it and started up a steep embankment, the chestnut clawing and scrambling over the loose dirt.

Behind, she heard Roger Powers coming through the brush. She heard him shout, but she didn't turn her head. Instead, she leaned forward and yelled into the chestnut's ear.

Blowing hard, the animal topped the ridge and started along its summit at a gallop. Aime flung a glance over her shoulder. Roger had not yet appeared over the embankment. She swerved the chestnut sharply, sent it plunging down the north slope of the ridge. At its bottom was a screen of bushes, and beyond this was the open country that sloped gently to Hawkins River.

Aime went through the brush and then swung west, keeping herself screened by the fringe. She slowed down now, feeling reasonably sure that she had escaped. Tears stung her eyes, and she dashed them angrily aside. She kept riding steadily west at a slow gallop, acutely aware of the ache within her, not allowing thoughts to take form in her mind.

And then, suddenly, she became aware that the chestnut's ears had come up. She jerked erect in her

saddle and a gasp came from her lips.

There, twenty-five yards ahead, Roger Powers' black horse was emerging from the screen of brush, and Roger was grinning at her fiendishly.

With a little whimpering cry of dismay, Aime whipped the chestnut's head around and sent it racing down the open slope at a mad gallop. Roger Powers gave one sharp yell and sent his black plunging after her, setting a diagonal course.

Straight toward Hawkins River the chestnut ran. At this point, the stream took a sharp drop. The water was white and turbulent. But if Aime recognized the danger she didn't care. There was only one thought in her mind—to escape from this man who had frustrated her at every turn, who had humiliated her to a point where she was without pride.

Seconds later, the chestnut had reached the water's edge. Aime's natural instincts would have rebelled at making such demands on her horse, but now those instincts were dwarfed by memory of Roger Powers' fiendish grin. Instead of checking the animal's mad pace, she sunk home the spurs and sent the horse plunging into the turbulent waters.

Behind her she heard a yell, and then another. In the next moment all sound was drowned out by the roaring might of the river.

The chestnut went to its knees, came up again, stumbled. Water closed about Aime's knees, and then her thighs. The cold shock of it restored her senses. In one brief, terrifying moment she realized her danger. With both hands, she seized the pommel of the saddle and hung on.

White water swirled about them. The chestnut was swept off its feet. A mighty hand plucked at Aime's slim body. Her fingers were swept loose from the saddle pommel. Another mighty hand forced her beneath the water's surface. Her lungs ached for air.

A moment later, she came to the surface. But her efforts to control her progress were futile. She was being carried along. Her shoulder grazed a rock and an excruciating pain shot through her, seemed to paralyze her for a moment.

She glimpsed the chestnut, rolling and kicking in the torrent, as helpless as herself. Then she was swept under again, and this time water ran into her lungs.

She struggled with all the strength she could muster, but consciousness was leaving her. She opened her eyes and saw filtered daylight over her head, and heaved her body upward.

Her head bobbed above the surface. Air, blessed air, poured into her lungs. She flayed out with her hands. Then, without warning, the current swept her up against a boulder.

Stars and comets streamed before her vision, water closed over her head. She felt herself plunging downward, down into a black, bottomless abyss.

When Aime returned to consciousness, she found herself on a sandbar that jutted out into a quiet pool of the river below the rapids. Nearby, she saw the chestnut quietly eating the lush grass that grew on the stream's embankment.

She turned her head and saw Roger Powers squatting on his heels beside her. Roger looked angry, disgusted and tremendously relieved all at once.

"You little idiot!" he said with quiet sarcasm. "It's only by the grace of Heaven and the genius of Roger Powers that you aren't dead."

Aime felt the warm blood coursing through her veins. She didn't know why. Perhaps it was because of a certain look that had come into Roger Powers' eyes.

"If I had my choice of more of the latter or the former, I'd take the former."

"The grace of Heaven?"

"No. Death. Death is preferable to more of the genius of Roger Powers."

Roger pursed his lips. "Then you're not going to be everlastingly beholden to me for saving your life?"

"I'm going to everlastingly hate you for it."

"And you're not going to marry me?"

Aime laughed hollowly.

Roger scratched his chin. "Gosh! That certainly upsets my plans. What'll I tell dad? He sent me out here with explicit instructions to fall in love with and marry the daughter of his old crony." Roger stopped scratching his chin and scowled. "I wonder if dad knew what a patronizing wench the daughter of his old crony was?"

"Patronizing?" Aime sat up. "Me patronizing? Well! That certainly is funny! I've never been more patronized in my life by anyone. And you call me patronizing! Well!"

Roger stared at her. He grinned.

"Well, I'll be darned! All I wanted to do was show you that I wasn't a tenderfoot. Good gosh, dad has been grooming me all my life so that when I met and if I

fell in love with the daughter of his old crony, I wouldn't act like a tenderfoot. He said no real Western girl would like a tenderfoot. He said she wouldn't like any man who couldn't show that he was boss. Good gosh!"

"Good gosh yourself! And I suppose kissing another girl right before my very eyes was proving that you weren't a tenderfoot. Good gosh!"

The warm blood was no longer coursing through Aime's veins. It was surging. What in the world was the matter with her, anyway? As if she didn't know!

Roger was saying, "How did I know you were going to pop around the bend just as I was saying 'good-by' to Doris?"

"'Good-by'!" Aime practically screamed. "Is that the way you say 'good-by' to all your women?"

"It could be," Roger told her coldly. "Most of them seem to approve of the method. Doris didn't believe that I would ever fall in love with a Western girl, and came here to find out. Well, I'd just finished telling her."

"Telling her what?" Aime asked, almost choking with suspense.

Roger cleared his throat. He tossed a pebble into the river. He scratched his chin.

"That I did fall in love with you." And he added defiantly, "And if you don't believe me, you can go jump in the river."

Aime shuddered. Once was enough. She smiled. "I believe you, darling," she said.

The chestnut stopped its grazing. It threw up its head. Its ears came forward. It looked at the two humans on the sandbar.

"Human beings," it thought, "are funnier than anybody. Good gosh!"

THE END.

DESERT LILIES

I think it was a desert scene,
With an Easter lily blooming there.
That gave to spring its urgent lure
With all its scents, elusive and rare.

There Christ must have awakened
To leave such peace in a barren place,
That spring when life started to live again,
Presenting a portrait of majesty and grace.

I think that hearts are deserts, too,
Where, in a void that absence begun,
God has sown His seeds of hope
And lilies may blossom in the sun

LELA M. WILLHITE.

If the palomino coulda spoke up, no doubt she'd 'a' said, "Love me, love my owner."

CRAZY OVER HORSES

by Kenneth Fowler

FRAN smelled trouble from the expression of grim intentness in Pop Lumbard's eyes as he came hightailing up the cindery path to the ranchhouse. In a moment, she would smell Pop. Pop always smelled of horses. A whiff of Pop's rich horsy aroma was all the perfume Fran ever wanted. Attar of horse had been her favorite fragrance ever since she'd been a wild, pig-tailed brat on her first cayuse, and she still wouldn't swap it for all the perfumes in Araby.

Pop was scooting along on his bowed old legs as though somebody had just given him a hotfoot, and Fran tensed involuntarily as she stepped out of the doorway to meet him. She could only hope Pop's perturbation had nothing to do with that worm, Bill Hackley, who, on the surface, was a deceptively mild, well-mannered young man. Which went to show you how far you could trust to outward appearances. The West was certainly disintegrating before your very eyes when a person of Bill Hackley's odious character could come out here, set himself up on a two-bit spread like the old Weaver place, and then have the colossal gall to announce he was going to raise horses, palomino horses.

Of course, this was a free country, and there was nothing in the Constitution prohibiting the raising of palominos right next door to a neighbor who also raised them. She and Pop, therefore, had chosen loftily to ignore the interloper. It hadn't worked, unfortunately. It

particularly hadn't worked when, seething with the spirit of free enterprise, young Mr. Hackley had snatched Golden Girl from under the surprised noses of Pop and herself at the Holderness auction. That, incidentally, was when he had revealed himself in his true colors, as a person of indescribably low cunning. He had mulishly refused to part with the mare, even when, with the highest possible consideration and forbearance, Pop and she had offered him twice what he had paid for his bargain at the sale.

This unnerving recollection was in Fran's thoughts as Pop reached the edge of the veranda and came puffing doggedly up the steps. At the top he halted, still puffing, and stood before her belligerently, fighting to get back his breath.

"It's that blasted swivel dude from over t'Weaver's," he panted out finally. "Damn'f he ain't come up with a palamino that's got four perfeck stockin's."

Fran had been prepared, from Pop's obvious agitation, for some kind of bad news. But this was catastrophic. "Four perfect stockings! Pop, you're mad!"

"Mad! I'm madder'n a roped bull steer with a bee in its ear!" Pop angrily flung away his cud of eating tobacco. "An' that ain't the wust, neither," he went on. "Git braced now, honey."

"It can't be that bad," Fran said.

"Ho! No?" Pop fumbled irritably with a suspender of his Levis where it was held precariously in place by a bent nail. "Git out yore smellin' salts now. The foal is by Dark Pirate outa Golden Girl!"

Fran said unsteadily, "Pop!"

"Yessir, by grabs! Now, didn't I tell ya y'couldn't never tell which way a dill pickle is gonna squirt?"

"Well," Fran told him, her lips tightening, "he'll just have to sell it to us, that's all. He'll have to sell something to keep that moth-eaten spread of his out of the red."

Pop cackled, "By grabs, he wouldn't sell ya Golden Girl!"

Fran bit her lip. She looked at Pop in annoyance.

"Did anyone ever tell you you were a mean, nasty old man?"

"Atta girl!" Pop chuckled.

"Pop, do you think I'm pretty?"

"Huh! That ain't no sixty-four-dollar question!"

"Maybe I could throw myself at him. In a nice, ladylike way, of course."

"Anything so's we git us that foal," Pop said impatiently.

"Saddle Lady Bett for me, huh, Pop? I'm going in and splash on some war paint."

Pop whacked his knee. "By gravy, now we're a-gittin' some place! I'll throw a hull onto Lady Bett," and he shuffled off eagerly, rubbing his hands together.

Inside, Fran brightened her lips, compressed her curves into a yellow pullover, and brushed her sleek chestnut hair down to casual shoulder-length. She surveyed the results in a mirror. Her mocha-colored jodhpurs were a little tight, but if she didn't gallop the seams ought to hold. "Nobody could honestly call me pretty," she thought

with a pang, "but I am sort of hoydenish-looking."

She went out and found Pop waiting, with Lady Bett. He held the stirrup for her and said, "Them britches o' yourn bust, come back and I'll loan ya a pair o' my Levis."

Fran answered, "Thanks, sweetheart. You be a good little boy, now, and momma'll bring you back a nice foalie."

She felt her confidence oozing away, however, the closer she and Lady Bett came to the old Weaver place. She wished she might have looked upon the loathesome Mr. Bill Hackley's activities with a greater coolness and detachment, but, being a daughter of Hot-spur Williams, she found this difficult to do. Her mother had died when she was only six and Hot-spur had raised her from a filly, proud of her as only an indulgent father could be proud, and spoiling her at every opportunity.

She remembered a time in Larabee, when she was only twelve. She'd seen a paint horse tied to a hitch rack in front of Tod Kramer's hardware store and had impulsively cried, "Oh, daddy! What a beautiful horse!" Hot-spur had said, "You like that horse?" and then, very calmly, had started untying it. The irate owner had come tearing out of the store, but her father hadn't even turned around. He'd paid the man five hundred dollars for the horse, and she had ridden it home in triumph.

Now, the thought was in Fran's mind that with Pop getting old, and their only hand, Eddie Silcox, about to be drafted at last, things at the Arrowhead were bound to be different. The staff would be down to Pop, Aunt Polly Pettit, the housekeeper, and herself. No doubt, it was time to recognize that the old free-and-easy style of life that had been the rule under Hot-spur, had passed on irrevocably, when he had. You couldn't bring back the past, but you could deal with an upstart tenderfoot like this Bill Hackley who mercenarily cared no more about horses, as horses, than a keeper at the zoo cared about his ring-tailed mountain cats.

Fran scowled down at Lady Bett's ears as she thought about Golden Girl. Golden Girl, with her smooth golden coat, her white blaze and her white mane and tail, had added up, very nearly, to palomino perfection. It was true she'd had only three white stockings, which brought her just short of top class. But even so, she'd have been cheap at a thousand dollars. And when they let Bill Hackley rope her in for a measly five hundred, that crowd at the Woody Junction sale must have thought it amateur night.

Fran had been driving to the auction with Pop when a rear retread had blown, and by the time she had made the change, with Pop too busy cussing out the tire rationing board to be of much help to her, a whole precious half-hour had been lost. She and Pop had skidded up to the auction tent just as Ben Holderness was shouting, "I have five hundred! Last call on Golden Girl! Last call once, last call twice—"

Fran, out of breath and exhausted from a wild dash with Pop to get to the rostrum in time, insisted she had cried out a bid for six over the heads of the crowd, but Holderness, despite a cordial invitation from Pop to step outside and have his bridgework demolished, had refused to reopen the bidding.

She and Pop thereupon had sought out Bill Hackley in the temporary stables behind the auction tent. They had found him in the stall with Golden Girl, looking, to Fran's surprise, practically as disreputable as Pop in a pair of wash-faded Levis and an old army shirt that still faintly bore the imprint of a staff sergeant's chevrons.

Fran's breath caught as she looked at Golden Girl. The mare was a breeder's dream with her perfect conformation, beautiful markings and wonderfully large, limpid brown eyes. Even in the shadows of the stall, her marvelous coat gleamed goldenly, and for a worshiping moment, Fran was too engrossed to pay any attention to Pop as he bent down and laid a hairy ear to the mare's belly. Then he had her mouth pried open and was squinting critically down her throat.

"This yore crowbait, son?" he asked Bill Hackley finally in a commiserating voice.

The owner of Golden Girl recovered abruptly from his surprise. "You're darned right, she's mine! And who asked you to come poking around her, is what I'd like to know!"

"Now, now, don't go gittin' yore bristles up," Pop said affably. "Thing ya gotta remember is," he quoted sagaciously, smacking a horny palm across the mare's rump, "color don't count if the colt don't trot."

"What in the blue blazes do you mean—if she don't trot?"

"Pop," interposed Fran, "if you'll kindly let me do the—"

Pop went right on, "What I mean is, you ain't the fust young swivel dude's been buncoed by a purty hoss 'r purty gal." He looked at Fran, and behind Bill Hackley's back, winked. "Pore critter's got thick wind," he announced lachrymosely. "She'll be a roarer, sure'z hossflies in May."

"Mr. Hackley," she broke in again, "I'm Fran Williams from the Arrowhead, and this annoying pest I have with me is Pop Lumbard, my foreman. We were just too late to bid on your mare, but we'd like to make you an offer on her."

"On a roarer?" Bill Hackley asked slyly.

"Six hundred!" cried Pop. "And we'll take a chance on her bellers!"

"Sorry, Pop. I couldn't, now, and keep a clear conscience."

"Seven hundred," bid Fran impatiently, and was conscious of Bill Hackley's eyes, calm, mild blue, straying irrelevantly to the wave in her hair.

"Who'll make it eight?" chanted Bill Hackley, grinning. "Do I hear eight?"

Fran snapped, "You might at least be serious, Mr. Hackley!" and noticed, simultaneously, that when

the owner of Golden Girl smiled, his eyes had a fascinating trick of squeezing in at the corners and kindling quizzically.

"O. K.," Bill Hackley said, "let's be serious. But do we absolutely need Pop to chaperon the deal?"

Pop bleated, "Why, you . . . . you raddle-headed offspring of a locoed kiyote, fer two cents I'd—"

"Pop!" Fran glared. She looked at Bill Hackley icily. "I wish you'd try and realize, Mr. Hackley, that I'm in no mood—"

"O. K. Consider it realized. You're not in any mood."

"And furthermore I don't intend to haggle with you. I suppose you could use a thousand dollars cash, Mr. Hackley?"

"Oh, boy, could I use a thousand dollars cash!" said Bill Hackley.

"O. K., then," Fran subsided coldly. "Write him out the check, Pop, and I'll sign it."

"Hey, now, whoa up a minute!" interjected Bill Hackley mildly. "I didn't say I'd sell, did I? I simply said I could use a thousand bucks."

Pop sprang up from the box on which he had been hunkered. "Honey! Let me bust him one in the snoot!" he pleaded.

"Shut up!" snapped Fran. "How much, Mr. Hackley?"

"Look, Fran . . . er, Miss Williams. I like palominos, too. And Golden Girl's just at that age when she ought to have a little romance brought into her life. Now what I plan to do—"

"Twelve hundred, and that's absolutely my last word, Mr. Hackley!"

"Sorry, no dice! But I tell you what I will do. If her first's a girl, I'll name her after you."

"You do," raged Fran, grabbing Pop by the sleeve and spinning him around, "and I'll sue you! Come on, Pop, let's get out of here before I lose my temper!" and they had stamped out together, looking, Fran was remembering now with a hot feeling of shame, like a sullen pair of horse thieves, caught in the act.

Although there was no tie between Pop and herself beyond a deep mutual affection and loyalty, the cantankerous old busybody had been a kind of unofficial foster father to her ever since she could remember, particularly since the death of her own father, three years ago. This, Fran was reflecting as she rode along, was probably as bad for her, in its way, as had been Hot-spur's unceasing devotion to her every whim. For, with Pop as with Hot-spur, she had only to ask for the moon and he would go galloping off to try to get it for her.

Fran's thoughts vaulted to Bill Hackley and she felt a momentary twinge of doubt. Wouldn't it have been better, perhaps, if she had sent Pop to reconnoiter the situation for her before leaping blindly into the matter this way herself? In this obnoxious Hackley person she would be up against a very smooth, sinister type of man, although, from what she had been able to glean from reports about town, he could hardly afford to keep on being coy indefinitely. Her chief problem,

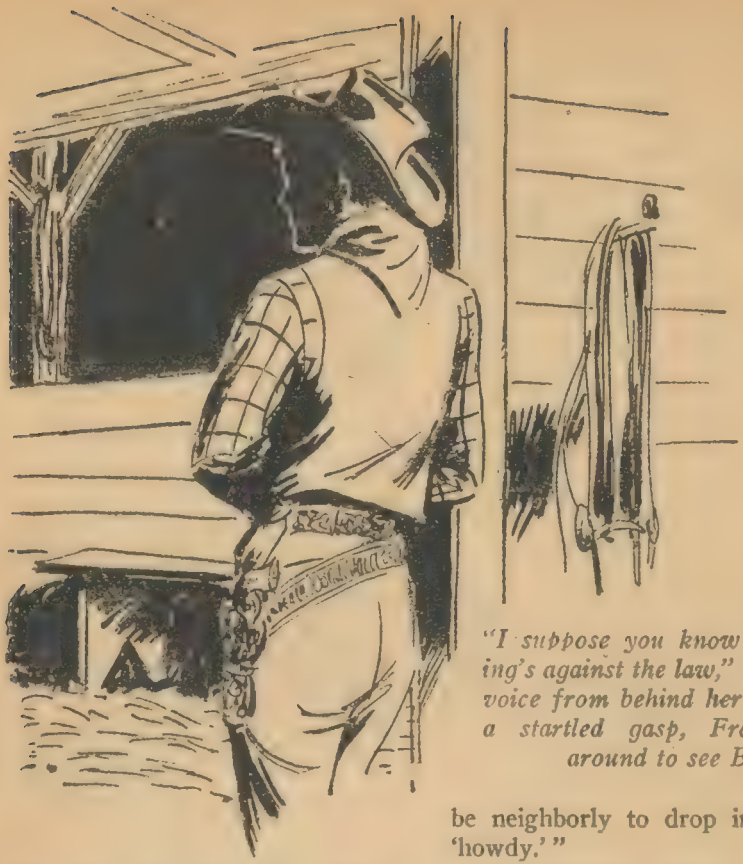
therefore, was to maintain a dignified, ladylike composure and not go flying off the handle till she had him where she wanted him.

After all, the Arrowhead would still be producing prize show stock long after this insufferable sap from Sewickley, Pennsylvania, had turned in his spurs and gone back to apple-knocking. There was, however, no disguising the fact that she had been badly shaken when his Golden Girl had foaled a palomino with four perfect white stockings. What made the situation particularly intolerable was the knowledge of the past two years of effort put forth by Pop and herself to hit that very same jackpot.

When, two years ago, she had first decided to make palomino show horses the Arrowhead specialty, she and Pop had undertaken a *pasear* to the J. A. Turnbull Stables of Orzipah, where the famous breeder had Bonanza Nugget, a fine golden sire whose get had been more than ninety percent palominos. She had purchased ten Nugget horses from Turnbull, and with this string as a foundation stock, had bred them to good sorrels and chestnuts with a satisfying get of more than fifty percent excellent, golden-coated palominos. But while her Nuggets had produced numerous colts with sleek flaxen coats and the requisite white blaze, white mane and tail, she never had had one with more than three white stockings. And now, by dumb beginner's luck, this upstart pumpkin-pounder from Pennsylvania had turned the trick right under her very nose.

Fran felt herself going quivery now, at the thought of it. She sternly fought down the feeling as she topped a rise that brought her into sight of Bill Hackley's tumbledown outbuildings. "You were just riding past," she rehearsed nervously, "and thought you'd drop in for a neighborly pow-wow. And don't forget now—you're a lady!"

She reined Lady Bett around a cut bank, then eased her down a shale-strewn slope that led to a new peeled-pole corral. A pair of sorrels were nibbling bunch grass near the barred gateway of the inclosure, but she saw no other sign of life



"I suppose you know tresspassing's against the law," said a cool voice from behind her, and with a startled gasp, Fran swung around to see Bill.

until she had gigged Lady Bett on into the ranch yard. Then she almost collided with Bill Hackley, with paint brush and a big pail of red paint, moving at a rapid, long-legged gait toward the barn. He halted at the sight of her with a look of pleased surprise.

"Well, if it ain't the Arrowhead," he grinned, "ridin' me down with six-guns a-blazin'! Light down and rest yore saddle."

Fran swung down from Lady Bett. "Thanks. I was just making a little *pasear* and thought it might be neighborly to drop in and say 'howdy.'"

Bill Hackley's glance swept her flatteringly. "Well, if you hadn't *paseared* over my way, I have a sneaking suspicion I'd've *paseared* over yours. Hear about little Frannie?"

Fran felt herself blushing under his steady scrutiny. "Yes. News of that kind travels fast around here."

"You came over to buy her, I suppose?"

"Now, Mr. Hackley, is that a nice way to accept an olive branch?"

"Olive branch accepted and con-

tents noted," said Bill Hackley with a grin. He put down the pail of paint. "Like to take a look at the little lady?"

"I'd love to. But if you were going to paint—"

"Oh, the heck with it! I'd rather crow over little Frannie than paint the barn any day in the week."

As they walked toward the stables she learned that he actually did come, amazingly, from a place called Sewickley, Pennsylvania, that he had studied forestry at Cornell, but had had his mind changed about that, while in the army, by an ex-Texas ranger and horse lover named Wildcat Smith, that he naturally loved all animals, except Japs, and that as an unhappy reminder of this exception he still carried a sizable chunk of shrapnel in the back of his neck. She also discovered, with curious tremors that were due to something she had eaten, no doubt, that she wanted to call him Bill and to blast some of the irritatingly smug self-confidence out of him.

She felt his hand at her elbow as they reached the crumbling doorstep of the barn and came slowly out of her daydreaming. Frannie, two weeks old, stood in the stall beside her mother, and Fran's heart leaped as she noted her rich golden color and the even perfection of her four white stockings.

"Oh, you beauty!" she worshiped under her breath, and for an ethereal moment she was in horse heaven, alone with little Frannie and Golden Girl, soaring in an empyrean enchantingly tinctured with essence of equine.

"Nice, huh?" Bill Hackley's smug, satisfied voice brought her jarringly back to earth. "Look at that blaze," he gloated. "Practically a perfect star. And that mane and tail—perfect!"

It was perfect, but Fran was suddenly remembering the purpose of her visit. "I'll bet that's the way you talk about all your children," she said.

"Maybe I am a little prejudiced." Bill Hackley grinned at her confidently.

"Of course," Fran pointed out, "you can't be sure about conformation till they're a little bigger. But she has got pretty good markings."

Bill Hackley recoiled. "Pretty good! You mean perfect! And as for conformation—"

"You don't have to shout," Fran said sweetly. "All I'm saying is—"

She stopped and swung around, startled, as a sudden sound came of a toe being stubbed, followed by a burst of lurid profanity.

Pop Lumbard came into view, testily rubbing his shin. "Blankety-blank two-by-four back there like to've bust my toe off," he grumbled, giving Bill Hackley an irate glance. "Well, where's the colt at?" he demanded querulously. "Glory, my shin hurts!"

"Pop Lumbard," said Fran with slow, angry emphasis, "you light a shuck out of here. Right now!"

"And leave ye without no chaperone?" Pop retorted. His sharp, birdlike little eyes caught on the foal, and he jerked around.

"Well, now, ain't she purty!" he said.

Fran shrank from the wise look Bill Hackley gave her as they watched Pop hunker down beside the colt.

"We've seen this routine before, Pop," he told him. "Remember?"

"By gravy—" snarled Pop, from under the colt, then subsided as Fran checked him with an angry stamp of her foot. "Pop Lumbard, you get up from there this instant!" she flared.

"Now, now, honey, mind them tight britches," Pop remonstrated, peering out cautiously from behind Frannie, and then he was squatted down again and with a look of intense concentration, was running his gnarled fingers very gently over the colt's fetlocks and stifle joints.

"Pop," cried Fran, quivering, "Pop, if you don't stop this nonsense at once—"

"Jeepers, you keep on with this whittle-wanglin' and you'll bust them britches sure'n judgm'nt," Pop growled, doggedly continuing his anatomical survey.

"Jeepers!" Bill Hackley grinned. "Do you really think she might, Pop?"

"Done it afore, by glory," Pop panted, heaving himself up from his cramped position beside the foal and cagily averting his gaze from the look of tight-lipped fury Fran flung at him.

"Young feller," he said to Bill Hackley, "you got a mighty sick li'l critter here."

"Bad, eh?" Frannie's owner responded placidly. "What's it look like, doc, spavin or conjunctivitis?"

Pop bridled. "By grabs, they ain't no question what it looks like! This pore li'l foal's got the navel string fever."

Fran counted to nine, before exploding. "Pop Lumbard, that's not so, and you know it!"

"An' I tell ya they ain't no question about it!" Pop rebutted indignantly.

"Now, children!" Irony sharpened Bill Hackley's glance at Fran. "Who'll make me a small bid," he invited, "for this pore, decrepit little foalie?"

Fran threw a bitter look at Pop, then swung her gaze annihilatingly on Bill Hackley.

"Why," she began in a strangled voice, "I . . . I wouldn't bid on your mangy, ugly little crowbait—"

"Not just a teensy-weensy bid?" mocked Bill Hackley.

"—if . . . if he was the last horse on earth!" Fran finished convulsively.

"It's a she, remember?" said Bill Hackley, with maddening composure. "And don't look now, pard, but I think your olive branch is showing!"

Fran didn't clearly remember how she had got out of there, but it had obviously been without pausing for station identification, for Pop hadn't caught up with her until she was almost in sight of the Arrowhead.

"Did I leave a dead body back there—I hope?" she said, as he finally drew up beside her and reined in.

Pop looked at her sullenly. "You made a plumb silly spectacle of yoreself," he stated flatly.

Fran paid back the sullen look, adding compound interest. "Remind me to shoot you," she said, "first thing in the morning."

"Yo're the one oughta git shot!" snapped Pop. "That colt'll be deader'n a stuffed kiyote two, three days, if she ain't doctored pronto."

Fran reined Lady Bett to an abrupt halt.

"Pop!"

"Don't you go a-Poppin' at me! That filly had all the signs—swellin' at the hocks an' stifles, fever—the hull danged business. He'll notice it, soon's she starts lamin' up."

"Pop Lumbard, if you're trying to—" Fran stopped, tensed, then relaxed back in the saddle suddenly. "Is it bad, Pop?"

"Sev'nty-five p'cent of th' cases dies inside a' three weeks," Pop said.

Fran paled. That beauty! That sweet innocent little star face! Then Bill Hackley's face intruded on her thoughts. She remembered that maddening smirk and her lips pinched together resolutely.

"There's no vet around here, is there, Pop, since Doc Halliday went in the Army?"

"None's I know of. But if ya wanted, we c'ud—"

"That's fine," Fran interrupted through tight teeth, and she gigged Lady Bett, thrusting her glance sternly straight before her.

Pop patiently indulged her silence until they had drawn rein in front of the Arrowhead, then, as she dismounted and flung the reins of Lady Bett up over her pommel, his glance went to her with a queer, studying look.

"I got some Fellow's syrup out t' the barn," he mentioned offhandedly. "Maybe if ya liked, we c'ud—"

She turned on him fiercely. "Don't you dare go near that place!"

Pop bristled. "I'll go where I danged please! You ain't talkin' t'yore swivel dude now, by grabs!"

"He's not my swivel dude!"

"Well, whatever he is, don't give us no call to let his colt die, does it?"

"Let him doctor his own colt, he knows so much about horses!"

"Oh, shore! He savvies which end of a cayuse the tail hooks onto!"

"Oh," cried Fran in exasperation, "why do I bother with a swivel-hipped old mossyhorn like you?" and turning on her heel, she started walking with quick, angry steps up the path to the house.

Pop shouted some insult after her which she didn't catch, and then she was up the veranda steps and into the house, conscious of a queer, dead feeling at the pit of her stomach. A strange restlessness overtook her, and after bathing and changing into an old pair of slacks and a heavy, turtle-necked sweater, she went out again.

A walk out to the corral, to look at a new palomino colt Pop had been raving about, left her cold and still fidgety. The colt was a beautiful animal, with a fine color and conformation, but its two white

stockings were on off feet, and looking at it only seemed to intensify her unrest by turning her thoughts back to Frannie.

If only Frannie wasn't Bill Hackley's! If only it belonged to anybody but Bill Hackley! Fran was remembering again, suddenly, the little filly's soft, warm nose nuzzling her hand, its gentle, understanding eyes lifted gravely to hers as she stroked it, loving it on the spot.

She thought, with growing uneasiness, "Oh, maybe Bill Hackley loves it, too, in a kind of way, but he needs to be taught a lesson," and then it came to her, with sudden shock, that she couldn't seem to think about the colt without Bill Hackley's springing into the picture. The thought coincided strangely with a return of that queer, hollow feeling at the pit of her stomach, and she started absently away from the corral, and then, on a sudden, nervous impulse, began walking rapidly back toward the house.

Pop, she was remembering, had once mentioned that Doc Halliday was now a major with the air force, stationed at Bowman Field, Kentucky. Well, Doc Halliday would know what could be done for Frannie, would know if there was any chance of saving her. And neither Pop nor Bill Hackley would have to know—

She entered the house, and passing upstairs to her room, heard Pop and Aunt Polly Pettit in low-voiced conversation in the kitchen, faintly heard Pop saying, "Dadburn, if I don't think she'd like t' cut a rusty with the feller!" An angry flush burned two vivid spots of red into her cheeks as she continued on to her room and softly closed the door after her.

The phone stood on the night stand beside her bed, and for an irresolute moment, she stared at it, hesitating. Then she crossed the room and lifted it off the cradle.

Fran said, "Sh-h-h!" sharply, as Lady Bett nickered softly. She had one of the big doors of the barn swung open a crack, but now she stepped away and glanced back nervously toward the house. It was a dim, square shape in the moonlight, but no light had gone on, and after watching a moment longer, Fran picked up her electric lantern and the saddlebag, and stepped carefully over the worn doorsill.

Inside, she snapped on the lantern and cautiously swung the door shut behind her. She remembered, from this afternoon, the side Frannie's stall was on, but in the wavering light of the lantern, things looked eerily different and she paused momentarily, prey to sudden doubts. Doc Halliday had given her explicit instructions over the phone, and she had everything in the saddlebag he'd said she would need. But suppose something went wrong? Suppose—

She flashed her light with a sudden jittery feeling up and down the long aisle of stalls, then sighed with relief as the beam disclosed nothing more alarming than a big calico cat

curled up on a pile of empty feed bags, sleeping.

"He doesn't even know the colt's sick." Fran reassured herself firmly. "There's not a chance he'd come out here at this hour of the night." The argument sounded convincing, but it didn't stop a nervous prickling at the back of her neck as she crossed to the stall where Golden Girl stood with her sick baby.

"Oh, you poor darling!" Fran cried, as the mare looked up and greeted her with a happy whinny. "Well, don't you worry," she crooned, putting down the lantern and opening the saddlebag, "we're going to make her all well for you, aren't we, Frannie?" and kneeling, she began spreading out the medicines prescribed by Doc Halliday. She checked them over carefully—Fellow's syrup, cod liver oil, quinine, biniodide of mercury ointment and a quart thermos bottle of milk. Nothing appeared to be missing, and picking up the ointment, she began rubbing it, very slowly and gently, into the foal's swollen leg joints.

"Easy, Frannie, easy now, girl," she murmured soothingly, as the foal backed up from the first touch of her hand. The look of dumb hurt in the filly's eyes clutched at her heart like a cold hand. Then, as it slowly gentled under her calming voice, she continued her rubbing, working the ointment in firmly but tenderly.

"That's a sweetheart," she cooed, working on, "that's a good little sweetheart."

"I suppose you know trespassing's against the law," said a cool voice from behind her, and with a startled gasp, Fran swung around.

"You!" she exclaimed, staring in confusion at the tall, loose-jointed figure of Bill Hackley looming out of the shadows. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I own the jernt, remember?" said Bill Hackley lightly. He stared down at the array of pharmaceuticals on the floor. "But why all the military secrecy?" he asked.

Fran blushed. "If you must know, I didn't want to be caught dead in your place after . . . after your attitude this afternoon."

"My attitude?"

"I think you were smug, egotistical and stupid!"

"Whew! Well, maybe I did think it was the old Woody Junction routine all over again. You'll have to admit it looked as if you and Pop were out to beg, borrow or steal Frannie away from me."

Fran swallowed. "Pop wasn't. But I . . . I guess I was."

"Ha!" Bill Hackley's blue eyes glinted humorously. "So it was a frame-up!"

"I'm an awful hothead," Fran confessed recklessly, "but I am crazy over horses."

"You and me both," agreed Bill Hackley heartily. "I mean"—Fran felt herself relaxing under that easy grin—"I mean I'm crazy over horses, not a hothead!"

Fran came out of her trance. "Well, this isn't getting me anywhere as a nurse's aide," she said.

"Here"—she picked up the bottle of quinine—"we give Frannie—you do, I mean—half a gram of this quinine, twice a day, and also two grams of Fellow's syrup and a tablespoonful of cod liver oil in a pint of milk, morning and evening."

"Say!" Bill Hackley's voice was admiring. "You do know your stuff, don't you?"

"Never mind what I know. Get to work," said Fran. "She has to get her first dose right now."

Bill Hackley got to work. So did Fran. They dosed the foal and at the end of an hour, she seemed to have shown a slight improvement.

"Look," cried Bill. "Her eyes are brighter already!"

"And I believe her fever's going down," Fran said. They reached up simultaneously to stroke the colt's forehead and their hands collided. Fran felt hers pressed momentarily.

"You were pretty swell," Bill Hackley was saying in a husky voice. "I guess except for you and Pop, she'd have passed out."

"Oh, you'd have noticed something wrong." Fran said generously, but Bill Hackley shook his head.

"Not till it was too late. From what Pop said—"

"Pop!" Fran exclaimed. "You've been talking to Pop?"

Bill Hackley grinned sheepishly. "Only over the phone. He called me and said to be on the watch for you. Said he'd seen you going out on Lady Bett and didn't know any place else you could be going at this hour of the night."

"Oh, he did, did he? And what else did the old horse thief tell you?"

"Said he'd be over himself later, to act as chaperoney," Bill laughed. "I told him," he added, with a twinkle, "he needn't be in any hurry about that."

"Hm-m-m."

"Mind, Fran?"

"I never answer the sixty-four dollar questions," Fran parried primly.

"Well, you're pretty enough to have 'em asked," Bill Hackley blurted. "As a matter of fact—"

"Ye-ow!" cried an anguished voice from the front of the barn. "Dad-burn it, Bill, if you don't throw that damn two-by-four outa here, I'm gonna ram it down somebody's gullet!"

"Old fire and brimstone!" groaned Bill. "Pardon me, will you, while I go out and give him the old brushoff?"

Fran felt her olive branch metamorphosing, miraculously, into a torch.

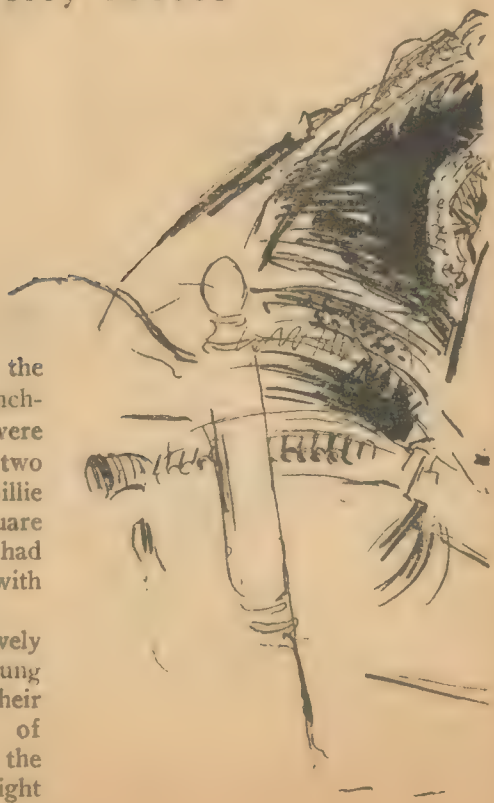
"Well, don't think this is the answer to the sixty-four dollar question, Bill," she said, "but O. K., brush him off!"

THE END.

THREE SISTERS AT THE WALKING K

A Short Novel

by Kingsley Moses



I.

In the spacious kitchen of the Walking K's ancient adobe ranch-house, a gay party of four were enjoying a late supper. The two pretty sisters, Bertha and Billie Knudsen, had been to the square dance at Three Feathers, and had brought their escorts home with them for a midnight snack.

The two men, both expensively dressed, were good-looking young Westerners. They had worn their gaudiest finery to the dance, of course, the colorful garb of the cow country, bright shirts, tight pants, polished boots and spurs with silver jingle-bobs. The two girls were conspicuous beauties.

The fame of the two older Knudsen sisters ran far beyond the wide borders of San Miguel County. Bertha, the older, was one of those rarely genuine platinum blondes, very charming now in bouffant, low-necked, pale-blue chintz. Billie Knudsen, a year younger, whose bright-golden hair waved loose in a page-boy bob, was in elaborate Nile-green satin. Once in a blue moon Billie went female, discarded her habitual rodeo cowgirl costume of Levis and sombrero for an evening.

"I shore like girls all slick an' slinky, like you are now, Billie," Bull Sparks, currently her favored suitor, said. "Don't you like 'em thataway too, Carter?"

Luke Carter gave a grunt which passed for polite agreement. Luke was very busy himself, just now, with Bertha. They sat so close that their shoulders were touching, his arm over the back of her chair. Then he offered diplomatically, "But I like 'em all fluffs an' frills, too, like Bertha here."

Bertha sighed, pleased. She had sunk the two thousand dollars which had been her share of the estate of their father, Knute Knudsen, the stockman, in the Three Feathers beauty shop. She had been at pains to cultivate the pose of a graciously languid lady of fashion, and had done it well enough to have half the girls in San Miguel County, white, mestizo and Indian, copying her style. She called in her deep contralto, "Any more hot enchilladas, Bab? And how about digging up a brace of beers for the boys?"

Over by the hot range, where crisp chicken enchilladas sizzled and sent their fragrant aroma drifting through the room, a blond, slender but wide-shouldered girl, in a starched red-and-white cotton dress, smiled at them and tossed back, "Comin' up, *muy pronto*. Comin' up, kids!"

The diminutive was strictly a term of endearment. Bab Knudsen, rising nineteen, was the youngest of the three joint owners of the Walking K. She dished out the savory samples of her excellent cooking, and then ducked out to the back porch to secure, from their big, home-made icebox, several more bottles of refreshment for the boys. She did not return forthwith.

"Bull, here's, like to die o' thirst, Bab," her tomboy sister Billie called presently. "What's bogged yuh down, kid? See a new star?" She explained to the men, "Bab's always starin' at the stars, readin' books about 'em. Can yuh beat it? Hi, kid, what ails yuh—string-halt or throwed your stifle joint?"

Bab did not answer immediately. Out of the dark of the range land, an unexpected rider had suddenly and quietly arrived. "Evenin', miss. How far to Three Feathers?" asked the voice of the horseman.

It was a pleasant, cultivated voice, the voice of a man with more education and experience than most range waddies could boast. He was evidently a stranger in these parts. The four in the kitchen, hearing the greeting,

were interested, attentive.

They were more interested, as well as curious, when, after Bab's invitation to light down, the stranger entered the room.

"Good evening," he greeted formally, his white sombrero in his hand. "My name is Jonathan Randolph, and I'm visiting in Three Feathers for a while."

"Glad you have arrived, Mr. Randolph." Luke Carter, the businessman, rose and shook hands. "Been expecting you."

"Not Jon Randolph!" Billie Knudsen was thrilled. "Jon Randolph, the rodeo judge?" The name was indeed well-known, from Pendleton and Molalla, Oregon, clear to the Mexican border, wherever cowpokes and cowgirls followed the rodeo circuit.

"Just Jon Randolph, at the rodeos, yes," the newcomer admitted with half a smile. Carter and Sparks were assaying him. Both girls were more than a little interested.

Although there was a trace of premature gray at his temples, the stranger's sun-tanned face had none of the betraying lines of a man controlled by emotion, or unduly weathered by age. His clothing was plain, but of superior quality —cream cavalry twill trousers tucked into unornamented black boots, an Oxford-gray jacket which fitted his slight, wiry figure faultlessly, a high, white stock with a plain white madras shirt, instead of the usual bright-hued apparel of the range.

"Join us," urged Bertha. "Get Mr. Randolph a chair, Bab."

Bab started to obey, but Randolph was ahead of her, giving her a quick smile, acknowledging her courtesy. He would have placed the chair opposite Luke and Bertha, but Bertha's sharp "Move over, Luke" indicated her wish that the newcomer sit beside her. Luke moved, with ill grace.

Bull Sparks was even less pleased when Billie Knudsen shifted so that she would be at Randolph's other elbow. Bull opened his mouth to speak, observed the stranger's gravely calm face and withheld caustic comment, for the moment, anyway.

Bab Knudsen, at the stove, was watching with something of the fascination of a child at the zoo observing some incredible new creature. Over-shadowed as she was by her sisters, Bab's experience of men had been wholly with the young buckaroos, the rough and coltish cowprods of the neighborhood. Bab laughed readily, quietly enjoyed life within the limits allowed her, but had been little interested in the boys she'd come in contact with. She was earnestly interested now.

But Jon Randolph tarried briefly, accepted only one beer and shortly excused himself. He vanished, non-committal as he had come, into the night.

"Cold cuss!" Bull Sparks allowed, as he edged up to Billie again. "Looks more like a ole-time gambler than a well-heeled cattleman."

Three Feathers had not, heretofore, been a rodeo center. But this year a few enterprising merchants, eager to boost the town, had pooled their resources to make up a purse which would attract the leading riders from the whole Southwest. They hoped to draw the famous bronc twisters, men and girls, from as far north and west as Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Salinas, California.

The circumstance that the Contact, Nevada, roundup had just finished made it the more probable that star riders would come the relatively short distance to try for the Three Feathers money.

That Contact rodeo was, incidentally, a blister in Billie Knudsen's consciousness. Bull Sparks had refused flatly to take her there. Billie was rising fast in the rodeo world, and had believed that she might win both the bareback event and the dangerous Roman riding at Contact. But Bull had said bluntly, "No, that meet's too durn puny!"

Billie might have gone alone. She had traveled plenty before Bull's arrival in the Three Feathers country. But young Miss Knudsen, daring and reckless as she was, did have a shrewd eye to her own advancement. She liked Bull Sparks well enough, but more than that, judging from the times she'd seen him perform, it was obvious that he was a brilliant buckaroo, a hard, tough, powerful hombre. A husband who is a star at the rodeo game never hurt an ambitious girl's chances. Billie, however much she had fretted about missing the Nevada trip, had been smart enough to stay home.

And now, along came this famous judge, to lend to little Three Feathers some of the atmosphere of the big time. Jon Randolph's cool management and habit of sharp decision had controlled many of the great rodeos of the past few years, clear from Pendleton to Chicago and New York's famous Madison Square Garden.

While she dressed, in the early morning of that hot Saturday when the rodeo was scheduled, Billie was wondering if the famous judge would remember her, would, just possibly, favor her a little. She'd use what wiles she knew, durn tootin'!

Bull Sparks, temporarily at least, rated only second in her thoughts. Also, more imperatively, she had just noticed that, in pulling on her skin-tight scarlet silk jersey, she had mussed her elaborate hairdo. "Hi, Bab, call Bertha quick!"

Bab, busy with the substantial breakfast which a bronc-busting sister needs, was a moment or so tardy. "Hey, will you forget your so-and-so kitchen?" Billie exploded.

"Comin', Bill!"

Bab's simple gingham dress, pale-green and buttercup plaid, was still crisp and spotless, but her honey-colored bobbed hair showed darker damp curls at the forehead. Serving a cow country prima donna isn't an easy chore.

"If you try to wake up Bertha at this ungodly hour," Bab advised sagely, "you're more'n likely to get your hairdo pulled out by the roots,

Billie, than y' are to get it fixed."

"Doesn't she know I gotta ride to town and plank down my entry fee before nine o'clock?" Billie impatiently stamped the soles of her well-shaped bare feet on the floor. "Doesn't she—"

"Keep yo' hide on, honey," Bab counseled. "It's just strikin' seven." Handling her temperamental sister as she'd gentle a snorty filly, Bab managed finally to get her dressed, and set at the breakfast table.

"An', besides, we all know," Bab added, when at last Billie had some coffee and eggs under her fancy, concha-studded belt, "that you have the cute trick o' letting your hat get knocked off, accidental a-purpose, so's that golden hair o' yours can float wavin' in the wind behind you. Yeah"—she stopped an indignant denial—"yeah, we all know, like you do, Bill, that it's awful pretty."

And so the statuesque beauty, Bertha, was allowed to slumber on in peace, while the excited Billie dashed off on her showy blue roan to lay down her entries for the roundup.

Folks of San Miguel County came early to the plank grandstand which ran along the south side of the rodeo inclosure. There were mostly stockmen and ranchers with their large families, but there were plenty of nesters and homesteaders, too, with their families even larger. It was first come, first served in the securing of seats, save for two small roped-off sections on either side of the judges' box.

Bertha and Bab Knudsen, thanks to the influence of Bertha's beau, Luke Carter, had the best seats at the show. Carter's restaurant and bar, the Nugget, did the biggest business in town, and its owner was constantly expanding, buying up mortgages on ranch properties, leasing graze land for cattle and sheep, speculating in mining ventures. Young as Carter was, not yet thirty, he was reputed to be a cool, hard hand at business. Today, however, he was seldom in the place he'd reserved for himself beside Bertha. He was obviously strung taut. Of all the merchants of Three Feathers, he stood to profit most handsomely today.

Preliminaries of the calf-roping event and of the regulation bronc-busting, with stock saddle, succeeded each other swiftly. In cyclones of whirling dust, the dogies hit the earth at the end of aptly thrown lariats. Many cowprods hit the dust, too, catapulted from the backs of smartly bucking cayuses.

Only half a dozen riders, Bull Sparks among them, lasted out the required ten seconds on the hurricane deck of a mustang—the time necessary to qualify them for the late-afternoon finals. Doc Hardwick, at his first-aid station beneath the grandstand, the one cool spot in the place, was kept hopping, setting bones and swabbing lacerations.

The two Knudsen girls, oldest and youngest, were in no sense blasé. But both of them, though

neither would have admitted it, were looking for a figure which had not appeared during the trial run-offs. The widely advertised Jon Randolph evidently proposed to work only the final, critical competitions. Local men, mostly, were serving in the judges' box.

An hour after the dinner recess, when Bertha and Bab returned from the Nugget, where Carter had entertained them lavishly, the bareback riding contest for girls was on the program.

The broncs for this feature are not, indeed, the savage outlaws which are deliberately gathered, far and near, from all sections of the West for the broncbusting finals. But to fork any salty range bronc, with only a halter to hang onto, is a right pretty trick under any circumstances. The pickup men, on their top horses, were alert to prevent accidents. With them, Jon Randolph appeared, also mounted.

There was a gasp of admiration at the beauty of the pure palomino he rode. The animal's coat had been curried till it glistened like gold in the sunlight. Its streaming mane and tail seemed to be just the hue of a fresh-minted silver dollar. In its smooth, effortless canter, it displayed the sweet manner of going of its none-too-distant Arab ancestors.

A mounted rodeo judge is unusual, but not unheard of. Any official who chooses to work right out in the blurring dust and intense heat of the arena has that option. For a fact, when the dust cloud lies too dense, unstirred by any breeze, it is often necessary for a judge to be out there, to be certain that some sly rider doesn't choke leather, or deftly hook his spurs into the cinch for a more sure balance.

Jon Randolph rode with the careless ease of a man who has lived in the saddle. And though he controlled his palomino with the lack of effort of a master, he remained always watchfully close to the current competitor.

Noticeably, however, he was alertly interested when Billie Knudsen, on a fuming pinto, came pitching out of the chute. Without apparent motion of his hands, the judge reared his palomino on its hind legs, pivoting on its two hoofs as if ready to take out in an instant toward whichever direction the girl's unmanageable mount might carry her.

Billie sat out the first few bucks with skillful expertness. Then, as is often bronc habit, the cayuse took off headlong, bolting the length of the grandstand in a straight line.

Sure enough, Billie's hat flew off. In her tight scarlet jersey, her flapping white-and-black Holstein bull *chaparejos,* with her golden hair streaming out fanwise behind her, she did make a beautiful picture.

Bertha, in the grandstand, said quite audibly, "And don't you think she knows she's an eyeful!"

"Show-off stuff, Bert darling. She doesn't touch you for looks," assured Luke Carter, slipping his arm around her. But Bertha sat stiff as a tree, obviously in no mood

for demonstrations of affection. Carter nervously sprang up and stalked away. As one of the leading promoters of this rodeo, he was known to be heavily involved financially, and had had, intermittently all day, important business at the box office.

The timer's whistle sounded the successful end of the ride. Popular applause indicated clearly that Billie would be the winner. Jon Randolph wheeled his horse in, to lift her off personally. He freed his own right foot from his stirrup, so that the girl could stand in it, supported erect by his right arm. So they came in triumphantly.

Little Bab Knudsen suddenly felt how hot, suffocating, the sun was. Funny to feel that way. She didn't usually mind the heat!

Billie's adoration of the spotlight was emphasized later. She had a literal spotlight in the evening's climactic event, the seldom staged but ultra-spectacular exhibition of Roman riding.

In this event, more of the circus than the true rodeo, the competitor stands erect on a span of horses, one foot on either animal's back. The horses are curb-bitted, with long double reins. But only blankets and surcingles caparison their bony backs. It's a breath-taking performance.

The girls who are daring enough to participate in this contest, a race of only a sixteenth of a mile, usually are in their stocking feet. Billie went her three professional rivals one better. Dressed only in a white jersey and brief golden shorts, she was completely barelegged. As the spotlight centered upon her there, balanced high on her span of creamy, matched mustangs, there was a roar of thunderous applause. The applause, be it said, was mostly masculine. There were audible female comments, such as, "Hussy!" "Ain't she the bold one!" "I always knowed that Knudsen girl was no better'n she might be!"

Such comments, true, wouldn't have bothered Billie, even had she heard them. She knew she was the cynosure of every eye in the arena. The eyes of the judge, Jon Randolph, were, of all eyes, the most important.

As the spans of horses lurched off from the starting post into a canter, a Nevada girl went off. The California entrant lasted fifty yards. She leaned farther and farther forward in an effort to maintain balance, then handily jumped, unharmed, between her two big roan mares.

Billie, perfectly balanced, snapped her cream-colored cayuses into a high lope. Her lone rival now was Arkansas Anne, a famous professional, who elected to dress from crown to toe in somber black to match the hue of her brace of dark geldings. Gamblers in the crowd immediately caught the striking contrast between the two survivors.

"Ten on Billie, in white," piped a native.

"Fifty on black," called a tall Texan.

"Hundred on white"—from Bull Sparks.

They had to bet fast. The race was nearly over. Arkansas Anne's span of blacks led by a neck. The girl in white-and-gold crouched low. She was talking to her team, but, good at this game, she wasn't forgetting, either, to hold them exactly head and head.

One of the blacks got too anxious, surged out ahead of its mate. The girl from the Ozarks struggled hard to check him, as her feet were carried farther and farther apart, and her legs formed a constantly widening, inverted V, too wide. Arkansas Anne had to jump, and just five yards short of the finish line, too. Billie Knudsen, erect again, went under the wire the winner.

Jon Randolph was right beside her as she crossed the finish line. Billie, with perfect confidence and characteristic audacity, stepped off

Billie, in her tight scarlet jersey, with her golden hair, made a beautiful picture and knew it. But, more important to her, was whether or not Jon Randolph knew it.

onto the withers of his palomino. So what could a man do but catch such a girl in both his arms, and carry her back, clasped close, into the blaze of the grandstand lights?

Again little Bab sensed that queer sensation in the pit of her stomach. Her sister's game was obvious enough. Who was a mere buckaroo

like Bull Sparks compared to a famous rodeo judge? But why, Bab puzzled to herself, should she feel so upset about it?

The presentation of the money prizes followed immediately. But the usual flux of oratory had to be choked off tonight—a summer storm impended. All around the horizon, ominous lightning was sparking, and thunder ran across the skies as if on celestial bowling alleys. "We'll pay off an' hit for cover, folks!" Luke Carter boomed through the loud-speaker.

"To Miss Billie Knudsen," he went on, "winner of Roman riding, two hundred dollars!"

Bowing and smiling, hatless again, to be sure, Billie graciously accepted the thin sheaf of ten-dollar bills. As a matter of housewifely habit, she thumbed through the crisp, flat packet. She was, momentarily, out of the spotlight, as the other awards were made.

A hand touched her wrist. A quiet voice said, "Let me look at that money, please, Billie. Ah, yes, I'm sorry. This one is no good."

"Why . . . why, Mr. Randolph!"

"It's counterfeit," Jon Randolph said flatly.

"You mean that ten-dollar bill is a phony?"

"Just exactly that, Billie."

Billie blew up. "Why, the dirty, cheatin' son of a spavined stallion! You think I'd let that cow-hocked, dish-faced Luke Carter do a thing like that to me! Why, the wall-eyed, goose-rumped, sway-backed—" Billie, when she turned loose, could burn the ears off an elephant.

"Steady! Whoa, girl." Randolph stopped her with a firmer pressure on her wrist. "Say nothing for a while. Leave this to me, will you?" Command, not request, was implicit in his voice. He quickly took the single bill from the sheaf, and disappeared into the throng. Only Bab, who was close beside her sister, seemed to have noticed this peculiar intervention.

II.

All three Knudsen girls had brought their party dresses into town for the gala dance which was to be held in Woodmen's Hall. Mother Rumboldt, the boarding-house keeper, had reserved a room for them where they could change their clothes, and spend what little of the night remained after the big shindig ended.

Bab had no pre-engaged escort. Up till a year ago, when her father had died, Bab had been utterly devoted to the crippled but still gay and high-spirited old stockman.

Old Knute Knudsen had known a hard, wild life as sailor, trapper in the Arctic, *vaquero* in the Argentine, finally to drift to Texas to gather himself a small herd—sometimes, it was said, with a long rope which might light on an animal not strictly his. He had paid with broken bones and more than a couple of bullet holes. But later,

raising his motherless daughters on the Walking K, he'd come to mature sobriety.

So, loving and admiring her sire, Bab had had little time for boys. Tonight, though, she knew she'd have fun enough. With her youth and graceful strength she couldn't miss being popular. She could outdance most anyone.

Somehow, in the crowd, Bab had been separated from Billie. Bertha, most likely, would be off somewhere, mooning with Luke Carter. So the youngest of the Walking K girls waited at Mother Rumboldt's and waited and waited.

The strain of those immortal melodies, "Turkey in the Straw," "Duck for the Oyster, Duck for the Clam," "Chicken Reel," and "Birdie in the Cage," were wafted from the dance floor across the street, somewhat muted by the steady beat of the rain which had succeeded the quick, sharp thunder shower. The rain, unremitting though it was, came straight down, so that Bab, the eminently practical youngster she was, knew that a protecting newspaper, held over her head, would be makeshift enough for an umbrella on the short dash across to Woodmen's Hall.

Still her sisters did not come. Well, Bertha would be with Luke all right—Luke Carter wasn't one to tolerate flirtatious goings-on. But Billie— Bab wondered where Jon Randolph was. Then she whirled to stare at herself challengingly in the cloudy boarding-house mirror. "Barbara Knudsen, you little fool," she chided herself aloud. "I declare you're gettin' jealous of your own kinfolk. Shame! You'd might as well savvy, right now, that we can't always have our druthers."

But Miss Bab Knudsen was not at all the girl to let a little thing like jealousy get her down. She recognized quite well that she liked this stranger more, somehow, than she ever had liked anyone, his rather grim good looks, the thin, sensitive face of high breeding, the quiet, easy courtesy of the man, his marvelous riding.

She was wearing tonight her first low-necked, sleeveless dress. She'd been afraid that it would be pretty tight, but after she had bathed and slid into the new gown's sleek sheath, she was relieved to sense how suavely smooth-fitting it was. "Like it was my own skin!"

She was actually a little startled at the bareness of her arms and lovely shoulders, and their pearly contrast with the tan of her hands and throat. Facing the mirror, she clasped her hands behind her, tucked in her chin so that the brown V at her neck didn't obtrude itself quite so much. A little better! She did look something like a girl in a movie magazine. She wished she'd worn gloves more regularly, riding the range, and she must remember to button up her shirt. Her wide-brimmed sombrero had shaded her face satisfactorily.

There was a crisp knock at the door.

"Drive in! Where've you all

been holing up?" she hailed, wondering why her sisters should bother to knock.

Jon Randolph came briskly into the room. "Oh!" He checked at the threshold as if he'd been curb-bitted. "I . . . uh . . . beg your pardon, miss. Didn't know there was a lady here. I was looking—Sa-a-ay!" For once, perfect poise deserted him. "It isn't you, youngster!"

"Bab Knudsen, personal appearance." Her voice, meant to be flippantly airy, betrayed her with a quaver.

"But you're beautiful!"

"Beautiful" is not a word in common use in the daily conversation of the cattle range. A picture on a beer calendar, or a sunset, or a promising yearling colt, or a girl, is most often described as just "right purty."

To be called directly to your face "beautiful," and by a man who obviously means it—well—

Bab's breathless reply could be only the trite, "You like my dress, Mr. Randolph?"

That bashful, formal word "Mr." broke the tension. The famous rodeo judge was his own easy, smiling self again. "Couldn't say how the dress would look, Bab, hanging in a store window. But I sure like you in it." He added the rather odd expression, more the lingo of the prospector than the rancher, "You'd assay high at any mint."

He remembered his business. "Pardon my drifting in, but the only phone in the house is here. Ah, yonder it is, I see, on the mantel." He strode to it.

"Want me to step out?" Bab asked. "If it's a private conversation—"

"No, no, reckon not. Matter o' fact, it's something that'll interest you later." At the click of the operator's answer, he said only, "Horrocks . . . Needles. Tell him No. 38. Reverse the charges, please."

The one-sided conversation which ensued was so utterly meaningless to Bab that she understood how unnecessary it would have been for her to leave the room.

"Yep, Horrocks? . . . 38. Is it raining there like it is here ? . . . Check. Got a little chore for you, and quick. Change the highway signs at the crossroads. Make the sign 'Needles' point north, 'Las Vegas' south."

Why, that didn't make sense, Bab thought. Any goop in the Southwest knew that Las Vegas, Nevada, was north of Needles, California.

The conversation crackled on. "Loco? No, pardner, it's imperative, and immediately. Hop to it. . . . Huh? Never mind just now, I'm in a hurry. Tell you later. Yeah, call me back. . . . No, not at this number. I'll be at Woodmen's Hall, Three Feathers. Number of the phone there is 44."

That was all. Bab waited expectantly.

Jon Randolph, at the moment, was not in the mood for explaining. As if he had completely forgotten the pretty girl in the

black gown, he took a few quick turns back and forth across the room, absently rolling a cigarette as he paced.

When he did speak it was with the abrupt, "Your sister Billie—she'll be all right now."

"Billie! But what—"

For all her own mental stability, Bab Knudsen was momentarily baffled and bemused. The man's tone, manner, indicated not only deep interest, but serious concern, about her sensational sister. Since when had Billie, Bab flared within herself, become so important?

She was immediately, consciously, ashamed of herself. She did love her sister, for all that Billie was such a show-off. "What's . . . what's happened to Billie?" she managed.

"Nothing." He still paced the floor.

"But what's she done? What's the matter?"

"Fool kid thinks she's in love."

So it was that! Bab, again, felt a little sickish. And pretty dazed, too. She ought to be worrying about Billie, she supposed. She wasn't. This man's assurance that her sister was all right carried conviction. No, it wasn't Billie's immediate dilemma that made her feel so empty.

"Tell me. Tell me the truth about it." She took a step forward to lay a detaining hand on Randolph's sleeve.

He turned directly toward her and looked down into her eyes. Ever so slowly his lips relaxed. There was a deep warmth in his gray eyes which set the girl tingling. They stood so close together that their arms were touching. He bent toward her closer, and his right arm slipped around her waist.

Bab did not draw away. She guessed that he wanted to kiss her. Why, she hoped he would. She felt relaxed, deliciously happy. But what about Billie?

At that instant, a gust of wind brought the waltz music, "Tales from the Vienna Woods," brilliantly distinct from across the street.

"Dance?" Jon Randolph said abruptly, almost harshly. His arm tightened, and he swept her twice around the room.

Then he stopped, and stepped sharply backward. "Why, you're lighter than . . . than sea foam, de—" He bit off the involuntary term of endearment, as his lips tightened again.

"I'll tell you, Bab," he suggested, after the briefest hesitation. "Suppose we two drift across to the hall? I've a phone call coming, as you know. But we can catch a dance or two together in the meantime, check?"

It didn't seem necessary to answer that at all. She had hardly time, anyhow, as bundling her into his serape which he had dropped in the entry, he hustled her across the street. They were in plenty of time to catch the encore.

For Bab, at least, the anticipated phone call, from whatever mysterious source, came too soon. Ran-

dolph hastened away.

Bab noticed that almost everyone in the big hall was watching his slim, alert figure as he disappeared. An ancient crony of her father's came sidling up. "Who in time's yore friend, Babby? Ev'body's figgerin' he's a sight more'n a rodeo jedge."

"He's a big stockman back yonder, too, Uncle Omar, I believe." That indeed was as much as Bab knew.

"May be," mumbled Uncle Omar Tibbs, "may be. But I seen the sheriff sidin' him down tuh Carter's place, the Nugget. They got two deputies posted thar, guardin' Carter's safe an' cash register. Reckon some owlhoot gang is on the loose. An' they is more money in the Nugget than anywhares else in town."

"No trouble—a stickup?" The girl blanched.

"Could be, could be, Babby. This yere part o' the West ain't ontirely gentled yit. She's still like the good ole days sometimes." Uncle Omar ambled off, trailing a rich scent of raw likker.

Jon Randolph was gone for a considerable length of time. Bab, with a new problem to puzzle over now, assumed the unaccustomed rôle of wallflower. Youngsters aplenty besieged her for a dance, but she was in no mood for the rollicking rough-housing of polka or Virginia Reel.

Tex Jones, *segundo* of the Running M, said, "Yuh look awful sharp in 'at black dress, Babby. But yuh look sort o' growed up, too. Yuh kind o' daze a fella."

"Growed up?" She wondered if she had. Somehow, she certainly felt different. Just a new dress couldn't do that to a girl, could it? She was still quite kid enough, though, to relish that "kind o' daze a fella" line. But she hadn't forgotten that other abrupt, astounding phrase, "You're beautiful." When a man whom you liked said that to you earnestly, spontaneously, it was just about all a girl could want, wasn't it?

During the period of nearly a half-hour, while she waited for Randolph's return, she had been so absorbed in her own reflections that the unwonted absence of her eldest sister, Bertha, and Luke Carter, had not been remarked. That pair were inveterate dancers, the swarthy Carter a tango master who found in blond Bertha Knudsen a perfect foil, as well as an adept partner. They seldom missed a party.

Bab was just getting around to asking the faithful Tex Jones if he had seen her sister, when Jon Randolph finally returned. Awed, the youthful Tex faded away.

"I want to talk to you," Jon said. And, smiling, "I'm too old for dancing, anyway."

"You're not. You're the best dancer I ever—"

"Honey, I'm risin' thirty-five. Mighty nigh old enough, for a fact, to be your sire. But there'll be time for dancing later, not tonight, but other times, and often."

"Yes." Consent and interrogation were mixed in the one syllable.

So he didn't intend to vanish like—Bab knew the famous old fairy story, only it was the pumpkin coach and party clothes which had vanished, hadn't they?

Another square dance, "Turkey Wing," was blaring to a finish. "Take 'er out an' give 'er air—oh, swing 'at girl beside you!" bellowed the caller.

"'Take 'er out an' give 'er air'—that seems to be a good idea," Jon laughed. "Just now, Bab, I'd like to drive you out to your place. Lucky I have a covered coupé, for it's still coming down in buckets. Of course, if you want to stay here at the dance, I can probably get out to the Walking K and be back before the party's over. But there is a good reason why I'd like to have you ride with me."

Bab didn't say aloud, "I'd rather be with you," for all she meant it. What she did say, masking her feelings, was, "It's about Billie?"

"Um-m-m, more or less." Then he laughed. "But mostly less about Billie. That salty filly is stabled for the night, and safely, I'd say. It's a sort of funny story, Bab, though it mightn't have turned out just that way."

"Then you've got her back again?" Bab hadn't meant to say just exactly that. They were halfway down the steps, heading for the coupé, when her unguarded words popped out. Randolph paused, one foot poised on air.

"I've brought her back again," he answered with distinct emphasis. Then he hustled her along like a maverick heifer. "Featherhead," he jeered gently. He tucked her into the coupé, his serape around her white shoulders, a rug over her knees.

So, as they sloshed along through the impenetrable night in the sturdy black car, the story about Billie came out.

"She'd figured on eloping with that gaudy buckaroo, Bull Sparks," was the essence of the narrative.

"But . . . but it wasn't Bull she was playing up to so hard," Bab objected.

"Huh, so you noticed?" It was so pitch-black that Bab couldn't tell if he smiled.

"Me, and some two thousand other folk, I reckon, Mr.—"

"Christened Jonathan—Jon to you, Bab." But he went right on, "What did happen, why or how, I don't know yet, was that your sister Billie and this fellow Sparks, as he calls himself at the moment, took off in his car, headed west, about three hours ago. What I do happen to know is that it's a right safe bet they're heading for California. And what I also did happen to know, luckily, is that they took the winding mountain trail which would bring them out about halfway along the north-south highway between Needles, California, and the Nevada State line."

"Oh, I see," the girl ventured quickly, "the phone call, about changing the road signs, had something to do with that?"

"Exactly. This Sparks—his right name, by the way, is Kurt Flammer—is strictly a circus cow-

boy, a sight more at home on Broadway, Michigan Avenue or Wilshire Boulevard, than he is on the open range. Give him a rainy night on a winding mountain-and-desert trail, and he wouldn't know whether he was heading north, west or up. So—"

"You didn't want him to take Billie into California?"

"Not exactly that, Bab, though that was part of the picture. I did want him to take himself into the State of Nevada. So I arranged to have those road signs changed, for this evening only."

"But why into Nevada?"

"Because, honey"—he lighted a cigarette, and the girl saw the grim smile on his lean, handsome face—"it happens that bigamy is still a felony in Nevada. Also, cheating at cards can be grand larceny in a State where gambling is legal. There are warrants out for Bull Sparks alias Kurt Flammer, in Nevada. And I've added a detail or two more. A posse will have welcomed Sparks and your sister right over the State line."

"A bigamist! A thief! That's what Billie was running around with!" The understanding came to Bab, though not till later, as to why Bull Sparks had refused to accompany Billie to the Contact, Nevada, roundup.

But her immediate reaction to Randolph's disclosure was, "Oh, Jon, thanks. I'm so glad."

Bab wouldn't have admitted, even to herself, that her gladness was not entirely due to the fact that her sister had been rescued.

Her companion said nothing, but his fingers, with a gentle pressure, closed for a moment over her hand. She was happily returning the pressure when his voice went on, "But now we've got to drift right on and check up on Bertha."

Bab's feeling of contentment was suddenly curdled a bit. First, this man got all of a whew over Billie, and now it was Bertha. Who was the girl he really liked in this troublesome Knudsen family?

III.

The ranchhouse of the Walking K was lighted up like a birthday cake. But, though the coupé made plenty of noise sputtering up the knoll to the door shaded by huge cottonwood trees, no one came to the back stoop to hail them.

"Does your oldest sister always go to bed, leaving all the lights on?" Jon asked, as he offered a quite unnecessary hand to help Bab out. The rain gusts blew only fitfully now, a star or two glimmered.

In the bright illumination which streamed out through the kitchen screen door, Bab noticed that Randolph's hand had dropped to his right-hand coat pocket. There was something flat and heavy in that pocket. And Jon Randolph, rolling his own smokes like most Westerners, did not carry any fancy metal cigarette case. But why would Jon Randolph carry a gun, concealed? Most folks, out here, wore 'em openly.

Bab was uneasy. However, she elected to take his light question

lightly, too. "Bertha's like as not to leave all the lights on." She tried to laugh. "I have to be the savin' member of the family. I get that from dad, I reckon. He was a savin' man, too, for all he didn't trust much in banks."

For all their pretense at nonchalance, there was wariness, too, as they moved the few steps to the door. Bab knew right well now that Jon had not come all the way out here to the Walking K just for the pleasure of escorting her home.

"You . . . you," she ventured, "thought maybe Bertha would be out here with Luke?"

"I hoped so." He went ahead up the steps, calmly enough, but obviously alert. He missed the one trivial but significant detail which Bab, however, spied—a moist red flower petal, caught in a crack of the boards.

"Jon!"

He stopped where he was, but did not turn his back to the lighted kitchen. "Yes?"

"Here's a piece of the poinsettia flower Bertha was wearing this afternoon."

"Uh-huh." His tone had no surprise. "I allow they've come and gone."

"Jon, what do you mean? Something else has happened, and now to Bertha?"

"Soon see." He stepped into the kitchen. It was empty—the whole house was silent. One after the other, he opened the four doors which led from the big room. "Bertha's room?" he asked, at the fourth door.

"Why, no, mine." Bab was at his shoulder. "Why . . . why, what on earth—"

The room had evidently been roughly searched. Drawers were wide open, their contents tumbled. Pictures hung askew; the mâttress of the bed was on the floor, and there were a dozen knife holes in it.

"What was he—" He corrected himself. "What were they looking for—money?"

"I guess so." Her voice was no more than a breath.

"But they didn't get it?"

"No."

Bab walked across the kitchen to a low, home-made bookcase which ran along below the two large windows. Without hesitation, she drew out a large, thick volume, opened it. At the middle of the book a square hole had been cut in about a hundred pages. In that ingenious hiding place was a thick wad of money.

"Yours, of course," Jon said, no question in his tone.

"Yes. I told you about dad not trusting banks. I kept my money here, you see. The other two spent theirs, Bertha for her beauty shop, Billie for new clothes. But I—"

Her explanation was interrupted by Randolph's abrupt, irrepressible laughter. "But . . . but the book you chose, dear! Why . . . why—"

"Well, dad used it. So I—"

"But, look, it's Karl Marx's book on capital, the evils of money. Oh, my gosh!" Jon Randolph plumped down on a chair and stared at the book. "A doggone good choice, at that." He controlled his mirth presently. "No one around here would

ever think of investigating that!"

He rose. He was his normally serious self again. "But there's still something ugly in this. There's—"

"Jon," Bab interrupted. "Look, there's a note here on the table."

"To you?"

"Yes."

"Read it, will you?" It was evident that he was not allowing his vigilance to relax, even for an instant.

"Oh, Jon!" Bab had grasped the import of the sinister communication. She read the typewritten, but ink-signed message aloud. Her soft, deep voice quavered a little.

Bab darling: I have gone away with Luke Carter. But he needs a little money, just to help us out for a few days till we return from our honeymoon. So please loan me the two thousand dollars you have hidden somewhere, you sly kitten. You never told me where you kept it, you know.

We have to be very secret. So put the money in the empty bee-hive hole of the blasted lodge-pole pine, just above Catamount Crossing—you know the place—where we used to play post office, when we were little. And do not put it there until an hour after sunup tomorrow.

Your happy sister,
Bertha

"Her signature?" was Jon Randolph's single, terse comment.

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Positive. But, oh, John, it's sort of shaky, and Bertha isn't at all the nervous kind."

"Uh-huh." Shakiness was, if what he had in mind were true, quite understandable. "Written on her typewriter, too? As a business-woman she has a machine, I reckon?"

"Yes, in her bedroom. I'll look. You can tell what machine a letter is written on, I know."

"We'll both look."

Bab's heart skipped a beat as she recognized that he was taking no chances at all in leaving her alone for even a moment.

Bertha's room was neat and undisturbed. There had certainly been no frantic search for money there. Jon pulled up a low chair in front of the typewriter, slid a fresh sheet of paper into the carriage and copied off the note. Bab, sitting on her heels, cowboy style, close beside him, watched intently.

Yes, no question about it, that note had been written right here.

"But why do they need money, Jon?" was the natural question. "Why would they need money, and so much? Luke's rich."

"Is supposed to be. But maybe —" He broke off. The charming cluster of Bab's bright curls was just at his elbow. Her hair, in her rich vitality, seemed to give off light of itself, rather than merely to reflect light. Jon couldn't keep his hand from touching it gently.

She didn't draw away from his touch, though she shivered ever so slightly. Slowly, her right shoulder leaned to rest against him, as if, trembling, she needed more solid support. Her eyes looked up at his, troubled. Jon Randolph's arm went out as if to encircle her, then checked itself. His hand went under her elbow and virtually snapped her to her feet.

Randolph swore gently but fervently to himself. What a fool he had been to walk right into Carter's trap. Bab was the only person who knew where he was—and she was at home, asleep.

"We'll comb the kitchen more carefully," he decided. "May find a clue or two more to what has really happened."

Back in the kitchen, with all interior doors closed, Bab suggested, "I reckon you think, Jon, that he made her sign that note, after typing it himself?"

"Looks too damn much like it!" Genuine anger was stirring this man, usually so self-contained. "And here's a lipstick on the floor—hers?"

"Sure, it's Bertha's." And, quite unaware of the unconscious humor of her comment, "She must've gone *muy pronto*. Bertha would hardly leave her room in the morning without first putting on her make-up."

"She did go quickly, I'm very much afraid." He bent again and picked up a bright object from the floor. "This hers, too?" It was a shining nacre button.

"Yes, one like she was wearing on her blouse today," Bab confirmed. "Why, it does look as if he'd got rough with her, hurt her. Why—"

Randolph nodded, scowling. "Yep, I'm afraid the rat did hurt her, twisted her arm, or something of the sort, to make her sit down and sign."

"The rotten, cowardly brute!"

"Easy, youngster. He wouldn't have hurt her much—just enough to make her obey him. A man doesn't set out to damage what he considers his own property, to put it flat and cold. Now let's try to relax and sort of figure things out."

He sat down at the big table. The flat .35 automatic, which had been in his pocket, was handy in front of him.

"I can tell you now how things stand, Bab," he said at last. "Neither of your sisters' friends are nice hombres. Both of them have records and are wanted by the law. A sheriff or two, in several States, would like to meet up with Carter, as he calls himself, and Bull Sparks, born Kurt Flammer. But they've both been smart enough to hurdle State lines when things got too hot for them. Now they've run into a Federal jam."

"Yes?" Bab whispered. She was standing close to Jon's shoulder, but holding onto the back of a kitchen chair for support. Within her there was the strangest mixture of feelings—a horror at the criminal character of these two men she had thought she'd known so well, and, on the other hand, the peculiar sense of relief that Jon Randolph's interest in her sisters had been protective, not personal. In her relatively sheltered life she'd had little experience with a genuine emotional crisis. Confused, she could no more than murmur, "How do you know all this, Jon?"

"It's my business to know it. The accident of the counterfeit note, given to your sister in the payoff money, was the tip. We have long been looking for a counterfeiting gang, operating somewhere here in the Southwest. The money, which included that bad ten-dollar bill, came directly from Luke Carter. He was in charge of the rodeo box

office. He prepared the packets of payoff money."

Bab, to some degree at least, had recovered her wits. "But surely, Jon, a crook would not point suspicion to himself by trying to pass a note like that so publicly?"

"A good point, honey." Randolph smiled at her. "You've got a brain in your pretty head. Carter—his real name is Cadore—was accidentally double-crossed by the stupidity of his own accomplice, Bull Sparks. Sparks was the hombre who passed the bad money, shoved the queer, as they say. Sparks must have made the mistake of giving a bad bill to some nester, who, in the rush at the entrance gate, slipped it innocently right back to Luke Carter. And Carter, never dreaming that any such thing could happen, did not notice, and was careless enough to include the bad ten spot in the prize money."

"You think that's what happened?"

"I thought so right away. We'd had vague descriptions of Luke Carter and Bull Sparks, you see. When Bull hit out so abruptly with your sister Billie, suspicion got stronger. I already had enough on Mr. Bull Sparks to switch him into the tender hands of the Nevada troopers."

"Then?" Naturally pretty, Bab was now, in her interest and excitement, really distinctly beautiful. The sweet, placid girl had suddenly come alive, an alert, vibrant woman.

Jon Randolph tipped his chair back to get a satisfying look at her. "Yes," he remarked happily. "Yes, as I said, beautiful." But he immediately switched to dry narrative tone. "Then, having disposed of Sparks, I strolled into Carter's place and found enough evidence there to permit me to deputize a guard to watch both his safe and his cash register. If I'd only been able to catch Carter there—"

"He couldn't get at his own money. Bertha didn't have any." Bab caught the trend of the plot. "That's why he's trying to blackmail me to pay?"

"Seems so."

"And, of course, I'll have to. I have the money. He might . . . he might kill Bertha if I didn't show up."

Randolph somberly agreed, "Yes, he might." Then added, "But this is my play now, dear. I have money."

"But, Jon, why should you?"

"Because it's part of my business, sweet. I'm only a rodeo judge on my days off, you see. I also work for the U. S. treasury as a T man, as the newspapers so romantically put it sometimes."

"Oh!" The exclamation was a little frightened. No wonder this man had seemed strange, sort of grim. But Bab, somehow, did not feel the slightest inclination to shrink from him. Instead, she added courageously, "But I have to take the money to the lodgepole pine."

"Anyone carrying the money will be a welcome sight to Carter," the treasury man assured her, "as long as it is only a single person. That's why he was canny enough to stipu-

late one hour after sunup. The lodgepole pine, I reckon, stands at some spot where you can see the country all around it?"

"Yes. But let me go, Jon."

"No. Go to bed now. I'm stretching out here on the couch until daybreak. 'Night, dear."

The girl felt a flash of resentment at the summary tone of the dismissal. Though she knew it was only Jon's determination to safeguard her, there was plenty of that fire in her which she had inherited from her father. Send her off to bed like a ten-year-old brat, would he? O. K., but she had an idea for tomorrow, too.

So she did at least one reckless thing right off. She clamped both her arms tight around Jon Randolph's shoulders and kissed him, on the right eye.

She slammed the door of her bedroom.

It was not the dawn light, but the warm glare of the rising sun which actually did awaken Jon Randolph. There was nothing to worry about at his tardiness. From Bab's description, the lone lodgepole pine he sought near Catamount Crossing, would be no more than a twenty-minute drive.

He freshened up at the kitchen sink, then rummaged around Bertha's tidy, businesslike room till he found a long white envelope. He stuffed the envelope, from his own wallet, with ten- and twenty-dollar bills, good money. He couldn't take a chance with dummy or counterfeit cash while Carter kept Bertha hidden. They'd pick up Luke Carter later.

He pocketed his pistol. Then he went over to Bab's tightly closed door and listened intently for a minute.

Presently, ever so carefully, he tried the latch. It gave to the pressure of his finger and the door swayed open silently. Only a cluster of honey-colored curls showed outside the bedclothes.

Jon Randolph smiled. "Spunky little cuss," he whispered to himself. All signs of grimness, harshness, had vanished from his fine features now. As he shut the door he said, half aloud, "Hell, it might be. I'm not so awful old!"

The rolling semidesert range outside was glorious in the sunlight. Last night's rain seemed to have cleaned the world, refurbished all the naturally vivid colors of the landscape. The tall pines of the mountain slopes were etched blackly against a pellucid turquoise sky. The waving buffalo grass was no longer a dusty dun, but glinted chestnut-golden. Late purple asters ran riot in patches, and the slender scarlet blossoms of the creeping pentstemon straggled across rocky outcrops. Momentarily, looking at this, remembering the sleeping girl, Randolph forgot his grim errand.

Then he jerked himself back to reality, started his car soundlessly —he had parked it on the crest of a low rise—and tooled along at a leisurely pace. He had schooled himself never to hurry when approaching a crisis. He arrived in plenty of time at the ranch called

Catamount Crossing, a wide elbow in the river where wet, pebbly shoals stretched almost across the stream.

There was the blasted lodgepole pine, sure enough, at the center of a flat mesa. Spears of stunted cactus and low clumps of sage were not tall enough to give concealment to anyone, approaching either afoot or on horseback. Luke Carter had selected his post office shrewdly—any moving object could be spotted half a mile away.

Jon Randolph built himself a cigarette with one deft hand as he strolled calmly toward the appointed spot. He purposely carried the long white envelope of money openly conspicuous.

The tableland of the mesa, sparsely dotted with chaparral, sloped up very gently to the blue-black barrier of the Tombstone Mountains. The surface of the ground was almost level, seamed only here and there by shallow washes where the winter rains had runneled off. So shallow and narrow were these insignificant drains that man need but take a step or two down, then up, to cross them. At any considerable distance at all, they were indistinguishable from the normal level of the flat.

To such trivial etchings of nature, however, Jon Randolph probably owed his life. He had stepped down scarcely twelve inches when his hat was blown from his head. That happened a full three seconds before the report of the rifle shot.

Being shot at is no novel experience for an agent of the treasury's secret service. Randolph dived and lay prone, in the shallow depression of the ground, dropping the envelope of money as he whipped out his own flat .35 gun. He swore gently but fervently to himself, "Should've figured the damn punk would try for both me and the money!" That, now, was Carter's play, of course.

Moreover, the dry-gulcher had the treasury man at a serious disadvantage. Carter was well hidden, somewhere a thousand yards or so away—Randolph could estimate that by the time elapsed between the arrival of the bullet and the sound of the report of the shot. The dry-gulcher's rifle, telescopic-sighted doubtless, could carry with precision well over half a mile. An automatic pistol isn't very accurate at one tenth that distance, even if you know where your target is.

Jon Randolph's personal feeling, in his predicament, was chiefly one of disgust at his own shortsightedness in not acquainting some competent friends in Three Feathers with his morning's mission. A couple of good men, hidden on his flanks, would have saved the situation, could have spotted the rifle's flash and put down a cross-fire on the murderous skulker. A swell job he'd made of this, he mused sourly, trying to play a lone hand against a desperate criminal!

"Reckon I was just trying to show off in front of that sweet kid," he growled to himself.

It suddenly occurred to him that this sweet kid, Bab Knudsen, was the only soul in the world who

knew where he was that morning. Worse than that, if he had figured that girl right, she would be out looking for him in somewhat less than three minutes after she'd lifted her curly head from the pillow where he'd seen it. And then—

Bab, without a car, would have had to follow on horseback. She'd head up there hell-for-breakfast and offer the easiest target for this bush-whacker assassin. She might top the rim of the mesa now, at any instant. So the battle had to be fought out before she could arrive.

Fully recognizing his recklessness, Randolph came to his feet and started on a crouching run directly toward the perilous woods.

Three more rifle shots whanged out. One hit to the left, one to the right. The marksman had gauged his deflection, had perfected his lateral bracket. The third shot, true but low, sliced across Randolph's boot toe. Agony went through his leg, as blood seeped through sock and split leather.

The effect of such a wound does not instantaneously disable. Randolph traveled fifty paces more before the next shot got his kneecap. That sent him down sprawling in the yellow glare of the desert flat, a conspicuous dark figure, the easiest sort of target.

Grunting with pain, he managed, nevertheless, to hoist himself on one elbow. Elevating his gun to an angle of forty-five degrees, like a trench mortar, he tried to return the fire. He might as well have employed a sling shot against a cannon.

He saw his enemy's rifle flash. But he saw, too, another flash from a cat-claw cactus clump way over yonder to his left. Then his enemy's bullet creased the top of Jon's skull and smashed him into blackness.

Jon Randolph came out of a daze of pain to a slow, dulled perception of release and relief. He tried to turn his head to focus his eyes on the figure which seemed to be half supporting him. Dizziness benumbed him again. But through the fog came a voice, "It doesn't seem awfully deep, darling. It's bleeding terribly, but . . . but you're not—"

"Dead? Not by a long shot," allowed Jon Randolph.

Then, his wits returning, his right arm clamped the girl, dragged her down behind him. "He'll get you, too, you dumb darling."

They remained so, his shoulder shielding her. His left hand held her cheek flat down against the sand, while the blood from his scalp dribbled over her.

"He'll get nobody, Jon," she answered, her face as white as the chalky alkali. "He'll get nobody ever, any more." He felt her shiver a little.

"You did it, with a single shot?"

"I had to, Jon. I'd had my sights lined up on him for over an hour, ever since he sneaked out there at daybreak. Now, let me up, dear."

She had to leave him awhile, as she went to get her pinto which had been tethered securely just below the far rim of the mesa.

"You'll have to carry double a piece, Checker," she told the colt. She helped Jon into the saddle and climbed up behind on the pinto's croup, to handle the reins with one hand while she held her man safe with the other.

"But how on earth did you manage to get set?" Jon was finally able to ask, after the spasms of pain in his knee, foot and head had become less acutely agonizing. The way Bab suddenly had materialized, to enfilade the enemy, was certainly miraculous. "When I left the house you were sound asleep."

"Find Bertha first. See if she's all right," Bab countered, avoiding the direct question. "Likely, she'll be up at the old Arrastra diggin's. It isn't hard to find—there's a trail which angles off to the right up there in the woods."

They found Bertha sure enough. She was, as her sister had predicted, penned up in the old mine shaft, one of the many mining properties in which Luke Carter had speculated unsuccessfully.

Nothing ailed Bertha Knudsen except a few bruises, torn clothes and hysteria, plus a quite understandable loathing for the man she thought she had loved.

Her story was virtually identical with Randolph's conjecture as to what had happened. Luke had lured her back to the Walking K with the promise of an elopement, then suddenly turned savage in his need for ready money. She heard Luke Carter's obituary without a visible twinge.

It was Jon, not the rescued girl, who, to his vast chagrin, had to be held into the saddle of the pinto

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colt to freight him back to the Walking K. There the bedraggled Bertha shut herself in her room for extensive repairs.

Stretched out flat on Bab's bed, Jon at last got out the first question he had to ask. "But, honey," he demanded, holding fast to her hand, "when I went out this morning well after sunup, I left you asleep in bed. How—"

"I wasn't in bed, Jon dear. I left long before daylight. I had to get up there to the mesa and hide myself without being spotted by Carter, you see." She smiled down at him wisely. "And I knew right well if I asked you to let me side you, like any man pardner of yours would, that you'd turn me down flat."

"Of course I would've," he admitted. "I wouldn't risk your sweet neck. But . . . but"—he flushed slightly—"I did see you in bed, honey. And you did seem fast asleep."

"Are you sure you saw me in bed, darling?" She sat beside him in a low rocker, so close that her face wasn't twelve inches above his.

He lifted a hand to touch her honey-colored curls. "I couldn't mistake your head, sweetness."

"My hair," she corrected.

"Well?"

"Bertha—it's her business—she makes right swell transformations, Jon. And some of the girls around here admire my hair, so—"

"Trans . . . huh . . . transformations?" The supposedly worldly-wise Jon Randolph gulped at the unfamiliar word.

Bab's big violet eyes opened wide. "You don't know what that means? Why, I thought you knew everything, Jon dear! Well, I reckon a transformation is just a wig to you, Jon darling. Bertha had made a copy of my hair, so I left the thing on my pillow and—"

Jon Randolph's head nearly split apart with pain as he tried not to laugh too heartily.

Eventually, however, he got around to asking his second question.

He got even a quicker answer to that. The answer was, "Yes, I'll marry you, Jon. As soon as you're well enough to say 'I do.'"

THE END.

DAWN ON THE SALT FLATS

From the hazy hills of purple
Spreads the desert, a white mat.
Up above stretch streaks of crimson—
It is sunrise on the flats.

THELMA IRELAND.

TWO-LEGGED LOBO

A Novelette

by Scott Ellsworth

"I'm broke to gun talk," said the Texan, "but not with women. That kinda puts me in a hole."

I.

SHE sat in the cabin and heard the wind howl, heard the hard, dry snow strike against the window like sand, and she thought, "If I hadn't got that wire strung, the cattle would have drifted before this blizzard. By morning they'd have been piled up in the canyon."

She had strung the wire herself, on the cottonwood posts Grandfather Milroy had set before he died. At first she had had hard work stretching the snaky, treacherous stuff, but she hit on the idea of stringing her cow rope from an end of the wire to the pommel of her heavy stock saddle and using horsepower for the job. So now the wing fence was in place.

This was a terrible night for any living thing to be out. In the far distance, up the wind, Hallie Milroy heard a wolf howl—rather a funny howl for a wolf, she thought idly—and she wondered how the wild things lived through these winter storms. The cattle could huddle together in the creek bottom, keeping alive by sheer weight and mass.

She stood up and filled the stove with cottonwood chunks. In the shed room Grandma Milroy was sleeping, but Hallie couldn't sleep with such a wind blowing. So she tended the fire, and after a time, she began to think of hot summer days when the huge, heart-shaped leaves of the cottonwoods sheltering the cabin hardly stirred in the dry, parched air. On those days,

the shadows of cabin and trees were black and sharp-edged.

The wolf howled again. And, suddenly, the girl by the stove sat very straight, her eyes wide, her head turned to take in the sound. That was no wolf—it was a dog!

He was howling steadily, a deep-throated, bell-like howl, as if he were trying to make someone hear. Hallie stood up. She glanced irresolutely toward the open door leading into the shed room. In a lull of the wind, she heard Grandmother Milroy breathing deeply and evenly.

Hallie crossed to the row of pegs beside the outer door. She drew on her heavy fur coat and buttoned it, pulled her cap, also made of the ubiquitous wolf-hide, well down over her unruly red-brown hair, drew on her big gauntleted mittens.

"Grandmother!" Hallie said softly.

But the old lady was sleeping. Hallie lifted the latch and tried to open the door, but the wind was shrieking and pushing as if it meant to keep her penned up in the cabin. Then she had it open just far enough to slide out.

The dog had stopped howling, but as she headed into the blizzard he began again. Taking her bearings from the wind, which roared in from the northwest, she knew that he was somewhere almost due north of the cabin. She couldn't see two feet ahead. But she could keep the wind quarteringly on her left cheek and shoulder.

The bell-like howling grew clearer as she fought her way forward. The dog was not as far away as he had seemed at first. She was coming close to where he stood, or was caught, but Hallie had no traps set in this direction. Then she reached him.

He was a big fellow, so matted with snow that she couldn't make out his color even when she stooped. He began to whine and jump against her. He tried to lick her mittened hands, then he dropped to the ground and started to dig furiously at something.

A mound of snow. Hallie saw it dimly. She reached down and ran her gauntlets into the dry snow. Something in there—something soft.

She got him uncovered. He was a man and a big one.

"All right, boy, we'll do what we can," she said, and slowly raised the man to a sitting posture. She almost expected to find his heavy body frozen stiff, but there was life in him still, for he stirred and moaned.

Hallie Milroy tried to get him to his feet. Failing that, she slowly lifted him in her arms. She was used to hauling calves out of sink holes and tailing up cattle that were down in the snow, but this was different. He must weigh a ton!

No matter, in the foothills you do what has to be done. No one is going to help you. So Hallie got him balanced, with his head and legs sagging, and turned.

Now she had to keep the wind on her right cheek, quartering in from the back. She stumbled for-

Grandmother Milroy helped the injured man across the room, explaining that Hallic had found him, half dead, from the snow and cold.

ward and the dog kept beside her, bumping into her knees, whining.

"We'll . . . we'll make it!" Hallie panted, but she wasn't so sure.

The strenuous work of carrying so heavy a burden kept her warm. She stumbled and floundered ahead, sometimes wallowing into a high drift that had formed over a clump of sagebrush. She had to breathe through her mouth in order to get enough air and she could feel a throbbing pulse in her throat and in her temples. But she would make it!

She stumbled over a frozen hummock, buried in snow. She was going to fall, and if she did, she wouldn't be able to get him up.

She didn't fall. The dog leaped against her and gave her just the little extra push she needed to right herself.

"Thanks, big fellow!" Hallie panted.

On, and now she was growing confused. Was the wind still on her right cheek? Then, suddenly, she saw the slanting ledge flanking the cabin, and the dim yellow square of the window.

Hallie got hold of the latch-string. She jerked and pushed. The door swung open and now her grip on that flaccid body was broken by sheer exhaustion. She stumbled forward and let the man fall heavily to the cabin floor.

Grandmother Milroy appeared. She had on grandfather's old buffalo hide overcoat and her fur-lined moccasins. She didn't ask questions, just mended the fire and turned her attention to the man Hallie had salvaged. Grandmother was a spry little woman with a crickety voice and a great love of peace and harmony, but she was worth her weight in gold dust in an emergency.

Hallie moved stiffly about. She shook the snow off her coat and cap and hung them up. Grandmother was kneeling by the snow-covered body, stripping away a slicker and mittens, shaking her head at the patches of glistening white where the frost had bit in.

"Poor creature!" Grandma Milroy chirped, and set gently to work to rub life back into him.

He was tall and broad across the shoulders. No wonder he had been so heavy! His hair was black, but there were silvery threads in it. Still, he was young—not out of his twenties, Hallie thought, as she joined grandmother in rubbing and kneading. The dog had shaken himself free from snow. He stood looking on, his massive head turned sidewise as if to see that everything was done correctly. He was black and shaggy, apparently part shepherd and part bull. He had big, friendly tawny eyes and, after a time, he began to wag his heavy tail.

The man on the cabin floor twitched, then opened a pair of dark, confused eyes. He looked up, first at Grandmother Milroy, then at Hallie. He stared at Hallie as if she had been an apparition, but a very pleasing one.

"Jest you take it easy, son," the spry little old lady told him cheer-

fully. "My granddatter fetched you in out of the blizzard. Land knows how she found you!"

"The dog kept howling," Hallie said shortly.

He turned his head and looked at the dog. "Tige," he murmured, and there was gentleness and love in his voice. "You old rascal!"

Tige wagged his tail furiously, then began to bark, short, happy yaps. Hallie looked at him and smiled.

"Guess we can get you as far as the bunk now, stranger," she said.

He looked at her again. "Sorry to have made all this fuss, miss," he told her. "I'm not used to this part of the country—didn't know a storm was coming up till it hit us. My horse went down and broke his leg. Then Tige and me—"

They got him to his feet. He told them, "I can walk all right." Hallie released her hold on his arm, but Grandmother Milroy kept step with him, her lean old arm round his big body. Once he nearly fell, but next moment he was sprawled on the bunk.

Hallie crossed to the shelves back of the stove and lifted down coffee and the coffeepot. She filled the pot from the water bucket near the door. She measured in coffee and put it on the back of the big stove. Then she cut off some strips of salt pork and diced half a dozen cold boiled potatoes. Soon the pork was sizzling. She browned it, poured off part of the drippings and dumped in the potatoes. Grandmother was standing beside the bunk, on guard apparently lest their unexpected guest should try to get up.

They braced him up with goose-down pillows and Hallie set his meal on the seat of a chair. He looked at it and his eyes began to glow.

"Excuse me, miss, but I'm as hungry as a wolf," he said, and began to eat.

Old Mrs. Milroy beamed, and Hallie smiled. This stranger was famished. He ate and drank and shook his head, and in the meantime Hallie got a meal ready for the black, shaggy dog who had been licking his chops, but not whining.

After the man on the bunk had eaten, he lay back with a sigh and Grandmother Milroy sat beside him, chattering about their ranch, which she and her husband and Hallie, just a slip of a girl then, had taken as a homestead.

"We were just getting things fixed up kind of comfortable when my husband was gored by a range bull, and died," the old lady said. She dabbed at her eyes, but grandmother never let herself cry, not in public. "But Hallie can handle everything," the old lady chirped. "Only thing that bothers her is this syndicate outfit that moved in last fall. My granddatter thinks they mean mischief."

"I know they do," Hallie Milroy put in. "They mean to hem us in and starve us. But it won't be so easy."

"Maybe they'll be all right," Grandmother Milroy said. "Maybe all they need is for us to talk to them."

"I've done that. The next talking I do will be over the sights of a gun!"

The man in the bunk had turned his face toward the wall. Hallie filled the stove with cottonwood chunks and told her grandmother to go back to bed.

"It's so near morning that I'll just sit by the fire," she added, as the old lady moved with her brisk old tread toward the shed-room.

Hallie awoke and realized that she must have been sleeping a long time. She had sagged down in the old rocker by the stove and the fire must be out.

But it wasn't. The tall man with the silver threads in his black hair was moving quietly about, getting breakfast. And evidently he had looked after the fire.

He nodded to her. Then he came closer. "How did you get me in?" he demanded.

Hallie explained that the dog had called her, and she had gone out and brought him to the cabin.

"You mean you carried me?"

For the first time Hallie really laughed. "Well, stranger, you sure didn't walk!" she said.

He turned away, went on getting the morning meal. He had water boiling and now he stirred in wheat meal, stirred it slowly and skillfully so that it didn't form lumps. He lifted the lid of the coffeepot and looked inside, then walked over to the window and, with his back to Hallie, stared into the early morning. The snow had stopped, the wind came only in occasional gusts.

"Where is this ranch you were talking about, the syndicate outfit, miss?" he asked, again facing Hallie.

"The home ranch is about two miles from here. There's a high ridge running northeast from our spread. These syndicate bullies are on the other side."

"Two miles? Then I can walk it," he said softly.

He stood looking across and down at her. Hallie slowly sat forward in her chair. Their eyes held, as if they were measuring each other.

"I don't understand," Hallie answered. "You—"

"I'm the new foreman for the Hudson Land and Cattle Co., the syndicate. I worked for them on a ranch they own down in my part of the country, Texas. I was ordered to come up here and get things started."

She stood up. For another long moment she stared at him. Then, with a faint shrug, she went to the pegs on the east wall and began to get into her outdoors things.

Hallie, overcoated and mittened, with the wolf-hide cap drawn down to cover her ears, crossed to the door. From under the kitchen table crawled something—the big black dog, Tige. He trotted across and when Hallie opened the door, he squeezed out with her.

There were some calves she had to look after in the log barn beyond the root cellar. Hallie tramped through the snow and

Tige raced ahead, occasionally dancing around to bark at her.

She ignored him. She did her morning chores and reflected that later in the day she would have to ride out and see if any of the cattle were down.

Tige stopped dancing. He sat down on the hewn plank floor of the calf barn and watched her. He kept turning his head to the side as if he were puzzled. But Hallie paid no attention to him. When she opened the barn door and stepped out, he kept at her heels, but now he was quiet.

A man in a slicker and a wide-brimmed hat had just come out of the cabin. He glanced at Hallie, then set off through the snow toward the high ridge that divided the Milroy valley from the syndicate land. Hallie looked after him with hard eyes.

Then she called, "Take your dog with you, Texan!"

He turned and called, "Come on, Tige!"

The dog went, but with obvious reluctance. He kept looking back at Hallie, tentatively wagging his bushy tail.

Hallie Milroy ignored him. She tried to ignore the man also, but from the corner of her eye she saw him striding through the light, dry snow, heading for the ridge.

By forenoon, the wind had shifted and turned warm. Hallie stood in her cabin door, looking out with black, burning eyes. This was the thing she had feared, that every cattle owner feared—the sudden warm wind after snow, certain to be followed by another freeze-up. The snow would melt and settle, then freeze into a sheet as hard as iron. Horses could paw through this sheet ice to the grass of the winter range, but the cattle were helpless.

"I've got to get out and see where the cows are grazing, granny," Hallie said. "It's *chinooking,* and they're apt to think spring has come and set out for the high hills."

The old lady sat knitting beside the stove. "That was an awful nice young man," she observed, following up her own line of thought as usual, without bothering about what Hallie had said. "I could see you liked him, too."

Hallie turned. "He was all right, at first," she answered. She thought this over and a flush came up over her clear, sun-browned face. "Yes, I did think I liked him. But not now, granny. He's the man they've sent to run us out."

"Well, now, I wouldn't take that turn," the old lady chirped. "Nice people act nice."

"People are nice as long as they act nice, and that lets Mr. Texan out. He'll make us plenty of trouble, if I let him!"

She closed the door and crossed to the pegs where her outdoors clothing hung. She put on an oilskin coat and a wide-brimmed hat, then lifted down her carbine, took a shell from a box on the shelf and tried to thrust it in through the loading gate. But the maga-

zine was full. Hallie dropped a handful of rifle cartridges into the pocket of her riding trousers and again crossed to the door.

"You stay indoors so you don't get your feet wet," she said, and departed.

She rode the wall-eyed buckskin. He was a horse with a notoriously bad disposition, but he was smart. He would never blunder into a hidden sink hole and bog himself down. Now he shambled through the melting snow, his ears laid back. Occasionally, he tried to reach around and bite Hallie's leg.

"Behave yourself!" she said crossly. "I'm in no mood for fooling!"

The cattle were in the creek bottom floundering about, bellowing disconsolately. Hallie made a quick count. All here. She turned the buckskin and sent him up a long ridge. The snow had blown clear up here and the gelding trotted fractiously forward. Hallie Milroy wanted to inspect her wing fence.

She headed the cayuse down into a draw. The snow was deeper here. The buckskin snorted, tried to pivot and go back, but Hallie forced him on down. They were nearing the brush-choked lower entrance to the draw when he snorted, his ears pricked forward. He was staring through the leafless branches, and so was his rider. Out there was the wing fence, and beside the wing fence were two horsemen.

Hallie recognized her guest of the previous night. His companion was a gayly dressed young fellow forking a tall, fine-limbed horse that never had been bred in the foothills. This youngster—he looked about eighteen—had his rope uncoiled and, as Hallie stared, he threw a loop over one of her fence posts. He took a turn over the horn.

The Texan said something and the young fellow laughed derisively. He pivoted his horse.

That first bullet Hallie sent chugging into the post. The crash of the shot and the smack of the bullet made the young rider leap in his saddle. The foreman of the syndicate ranch twisted his head sharply, evidently saw the smoke from Hallie's carbine, and headed at a brisk trot toward the spot where she sat, gun ready. Next moment, the one in the gay raiment spurred his saddler and took the lead.

He came racing through the snow, oblivious or ignorant of the fact that at any moment his tall horse might trip on a hidden boulder and go down. As he approached the mouth of the draw, he reached for the silver-mounted revolver at his right hip.

Hallie sent this next bullet just past his ear. "You pull that gun and I'll drill you between the eyes, stranger!" she cried. "You're on my land, trying to snake my wire down."

The tall man with the silver-shot black hair had come up. He said, "Keep your hand off your gun, kid!"

But the young tenderfoot—he was evidently no foothill man—grasped the checkered butt of the revolver and snaked it out. As Hallie squinted at him over the shining barrel of her saddle gun, the Texan leaned over, gripped the hog-leg, jerked it out of the kid's hand.

"You're outclassed," he drawled. "She'd do just what she says she'd do. Sit still a moment!"

The kid had turned crimson. He had pale-gray eyes, set too close together, and he was obviously in the habit of being treated with respect. His lips shook as he pressed them together and sat staring with undisguised hatred at Hallie.

The Texan said, "Miss, we didn't ride over to pull out your fence—just to have a look-and-see at how it lies. You sure it's on your side of the line?"

"You're on my land till you hit that high ridge over there," Hallie retorted. "You're on my land, that's my fence, and if anyone starts jerking posts, I'll shoot to kill. Do they talk that kind of language down where you come from?"

His faint, wintery smile had appreciation in it, as did his steady eyes as they took in the trim figure of the girl on the buckskin cayuse. Hallie stared back at him, trying to steady the unruly beating of her heart. Granny had said that she liked this man. Well, in different circumstances—

"Yes, miss, I'm broke to gun talk," he said softly. "But not with women. That kind of puts me in a hole."

"All you've got to do is to stay where you belong. I shan't come jerking your posts!"

"No, but you'll have to cross our land, miss, to get to market. We've got you hemmed in."

The girl on the wall-eyed buckskin felt a moment of panic. Then she replied brusquely, "I've got a right to a way out."

Gently, he shook his head. "Lots of folks believe that, but it's just a superstition," he told her. "The law reads that you've got to buy a right of way if you want to cross the other fellow's land, and we won't sell."

He sat looking at her, and she saw something—pity, dislike of his job, or was it something entirely different?—in his level eyes. Unconsciously, Hallie's glance softened. Then she saw the Texan's companion staring malevolently at her and she laughed.

"Better keep that lap dog at home, after this," she said. "He'll get his ears shot off if he goes yapping around in this part of the hills."

She jabbed her hooks into the buckskin's flanks and he squealed and bounded forward. She went by the big man with the captured revolver so close that she could have reached out and touched him. And, somehow, she would have liked to do it—to grip his hand, to pat his shoulder.

II.

Hallie guided the cayuse down along the wing fence. She didn't

turn to see what the two syndicate men were doing. The younger, the one in the fancy cowboy outfit, she knew to be the son of one of the owners. Jeb Rutherford, at the county seat store, had described him to her.

"A poodle," she thought, as she turned homeward. "But he might give someone a nasty bite. Maybe I ought to have plugged him."

But that was just talk—Hallie Milroy didn't need a private cemetery to bury her dead in. So far she had got by in this country, where you were only as good as your ability to back up your word, by talking little and minding her own business. But now she knew she had a fight on her hands.

As she neared the cabin under the cottonwoods, she saw that the door was open and that Grandmother Milroy stood looking out. Beside the old lady was something else—a big, shaggy black dog. As Hallie rode into the ranch yard, he came bounding toward her, greeting her arrival with bell-like yelps of joy. A short piece of rope, evidently chewed off from a longer piece, was tied around his neck.

As she swung down from the saddle, Tige leaped up as if he wanted to kiss her. "Get out," she ordered sharply. "What are you doing here again?"

He backed away, wagged his tail dubiously, then sat down and looked at some imaginary object on the distant ridge. But every moment or two, he stole a glance at Hallie.

Grandma Milroy, wearing a pair of grandfather's high boots, came briskly through the snow. "He came back," she said delightedly. "He likes you, just like his owner does!"

Hallie's eyes burned with anger. "That man and I hate each other," she snapped. "And I sure am not going to have his mongrel dog around! Come now, *hi clatawah!* You sabe Chinook? *Clatawah*—beat it! Get out of here!"

Grandma looked offended and the black dog looked hurt. His head drooped, he got slowly up and moved away. He walked as slowly as possible to the brush that fringed the ranch clearing, then he turned.

"Go on, go home!" Hallie shouted.

He slunk into the brush, and Grandma Milroy, evidently deeply incensed, turned and went at a brisk but dignified walk back toward the cabin. Hallie felt like a murderer.

She led the buckskin into the log barn, removed the riding gear, rubbed him dry with a grain sack, and tied him in his stall. When she emerged from the barn, her first covert glance was toward the brush. A shaggy head was thrust out, two pleading eyes were fixed dolorously on Hallie.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" she murmured. She bit her lip and headed for the cabin.

Then she whirled. "Come on, you reprobate!" she called. "Come on! I'm not going to eat you!"

Tige may not have understood the Chinook jargon, but he certainly understood Hallie Milroy

He grabbed Hallie by the arm, pushed her toward where the old lady stood, watching. "Stay there," he ordered curtly.

now. If ever a dog danced, he danced his way back to where Hallie stood, unwillingly smiling, waiting for him. He jumped against her and nearly knocked her down. Then, barking and prancing, he led the way to the cabin. Grandma Milroy was beaming when the two came into the living room.

That warm spring wind had been premature, as Hallie had known it must be. By mid-afternoon, the sky had hazed over again and cold air was drifting in from the northwest.

The breeze quickened, grew icy. Then snow pellets, as hard as bird shot, stung Hallie's cheeks. By the time she had milked the two lean foothill cows that were kept in the log barn, snow was blowing thick and fast, and the blizzard wind was again moaning. By tomorrow the melted snow of the night before would be frozen.

Tige, who had accompanied her while she worked, crowded into the cabin with her and sat down beside the stove, panting, as if he had done all the chores. Hallie looked moodily at him. She hated to have him around—he reminded her of that other stranger from down the southern trail.

The wind rose till it came to the two women in the cabin as a high, sustained moan, broken by an occasional shriek. The woodbox was piled high with cottonwood chunks, the stove sent out great waves of heat, but lethal cold moved through the logs as if they were made of tumbleweed.

"I expect the cows moved out of the creek bottom this afternoon," Grandma Milroy observed.

"I expect so. Some of them will be down by morning. That sheet ice under the new snow will be as slippery as if it was greased."

"It ain't no proper work for a nice girl like you, tailing up cows," grandma said. She sat looking at the fire, not at Hallie.

"Well," Hallie answered shortly, "I guess I'll have to do it."

"Maybe some of the neighbors—"

Grandma Milroy broke off as Hallie turned her scornful eyes upon her. Hallie said, "If you think any of that bunch of two-legged lobos that work for the land and cattle outfit is going to help me get my cows up, you're mistaken. I can handle that job myself, and handle them, too!"

But she wasn't so sure, not down deep in her mind. She could see again the venomous look that Eastern playboy had given her. And the Texan—perhaps he did like Hallie a little, but he was hired to help drive the small ranchers out of the country. Free grass was coming to an end, and the big people meant to have all that was left.

Grandma cooked supper. She fixed a big kettle of grub for Tige, which he ate with evident approval. Then he settled down in front of the stove, his shaggy head between his paws. Hallie saw him blinking his tawny eyes at the fire.

Later, an hour later, perhaps, after grandma had gone to bed, the dog raised his head and looked

toward the window. He growled softly, then again lay resting. But five minutes later, he got up and stood with his ears tipped forward, staring at the window. He glanced at Hallie, as if to ask her opinion. She listened, but could hear nothing.

Tige started to lie down, then growled savagely and trotted across to the door. He stood there whining and scratching.

"You better stay in here," Hallie told him. "It's cold out there!"

Tige whined and continued to scratch. Hallie walked over and opened the dor. He went out with a swift bound.

He vanished into the night and, for several minutes, Hallie heard nothing. Then, from far up the wind, came an angry barking. Hallie wondered if Tige could possibly have heard or smelled a wolf prowling close to the cabin, but a moment later there came another sound—the blast of a rifle shot, followed by a sharp howl from the dog. Then silence.

She crossed the cabin in three swift strides. She slid into her yellow slicker, drew on her cap, lifted down her carbine. Her lips shook a little and she pressed them firmly together.

Grandma was sleeping. Hallie Milroy pushed the door open against the drive of the blizzard wind and stepped down into the snow. She stood listening.

Now she could hear a low howling, as of some animal caught in a trap. She pushed forward, stopping every few steps to catch her breath and listen. No sound, except the dog. She went on with her eyes nearly closed and her cheeks stinging under the bombardment of gritty snow.

Hallie shouted, "Tige! Tige!"

That would give whoever had fired the rifle shot warning that she was coming, but no matter. Now Tige yelped and he was close ahead.

He was crouching in the shelter of a stack of wild hay that Hallie had put up the fall before. The smell of burned grass came to her. Now she, too, was in the lee of the haystack and could open her eyes fully. The dog whined and bumped her. She put down her hand to pat him.

There was a bullet slash across the wide domed head. Blood had spread into the shaggy hair. Tige whined and pressed against her legs. And Hallie saw where someone had tried to fire the haystack, had failed only because the snow was coated with snow and ice. That was what Tige had heard—one of the syndicate men.

Suddenly, with a low cry, she turned and set off toward the cabin, running, calling to the dog. It came to her that this trick of setting fire to the hay had been just a ruse to get her away from the cabin.

"Come on, Tige!" she panted, and raced through the snow, with the wind on her right cheek and shoulder. She stumbled over a bunch of sagebrush, went to her knees. As she staggered erect, she saw a red glow through the smother

of snow, straight ahead.

The cabin was blazing when Hallie Milroy reached it. Grandmother Milroy had crawled out the shed-room window and was standing, wrapped in a buffalo robe coat, staring with scared old eyes at the roaring flames. Whoever had started this fire had thrown coal oil or pitch over the front door.

Hallie stood momentarily paralyzed. Everything would go—they would be houseless and without even a sackful of flour or a side of salt pork!

Hallie cried out thickly, furiously, and ran toward the blazing cabin. She had come so close that she could feel the fierce heat on her face, when a man on a bay horse emerged out of the gray darkness of the blizzard.

He leaped down and grasped Hallie by the arms. He lifted her off her feet and carried her toward the spot where the old lady stood crying and rubbing her withered old hands.

"Stay there!" he snarled, and Hallie wonderingly realized that she would have to obey.

He ran toward the cabin, disappeared behind the shed room. Then Hallie heard things being thrown out. She stared at her grandmother and saw the old lady nod triumphantly.

"I told you we had good neighbors!" Grandma Milroy said.

Hallie laughed. Her voice caught, and she sobbed. She threw off the spell the Texan had put upon her and ran through the snow to the back of the cabin.

Hallie began to carry to safety the things he was throwing out. She beat a path to the root cellar and stowed sacks of flour, sides of meat and boxes and bags of rice, sugar and spices in the warm room built into the ridge. Out came blankets, feather ticks, pillows. Now Grandmother Milroy had stripped off her big coat and was working.

"Lan's sakes," she chirped, "the least a person can do is to help!"

They got most of the stuff out of the cabin. But now the shake roof was beginning to blaze and crackle.

"Come out!" Hallie screamed in at the rear window.

A stifled voice said, "I'll come when I'm good and ready! Look out—"

A bucket, a washtub and two homemade chairs erupted through the window. But the roof was beginning to buckle.

Hallie Milroy gripped the window sill, threw a leg over it and leaped down inside. It was deadly hot in here, and the acrid fumes of burning resin made her strangle. Through the flames she saw a man lurching toward the stove.

Hallie ran toward him. She caught his arm with both hands and began to back toward the window.

"You fool—oh, you big stupid fool!" she sobbed. "Come out, while there's time, or I'll stay here with you and be burned!"

He lifted her again, carried her to the window, thrust her out. But,

after that, he climbed out himself. He looped an arm round Hallie Milroy, half carried and half led her to safety. The cabin was beginning to tumble inward.

Hallie was out early next day, urging the wall-eyed cayuse through the snow that continued to fall fitfully. She reached a bench above the creek and saw that some of the weaker cows were down, snowed over.

Hallie worked systematically. She would swing down from the saddle, grab a tail, loop it around the saddlehorn. The cayuse did the rest. She had tailed up nearly a dozen cows when a man came riding out of the smother. A tall man, with powerful shoulders, wearing a felt hat with the brim tied down to protect his ears.

He rode straight to where Hallie had checked her horse. He was laughing. Not only that, but he rode so close that he could sweep Hallie out of her saddle easily, lift her over in front of him.

"I'm fired," he said. "In fact, after I had wiped the walls and the floor and part of the ceiling with that spoiled brat from York State, I fired myself! Hallie, he's promised to get out of the country, go back where he belongs. I know his dad. I think I can make a dicker with him about your right of way. But if I can't—"

Hallie was breathing fast, her head drooped, her eyes closed. But when he stopped speaking, she opened her eyes and looked slowly up.

His lips were laughing, but his eyes were questioning—no, demanding.

"If you can't?" she whispered.

The Texan laughed. "If I can't, we'll fight him to a finish. That is, if you'll take me on. Hallie, do I go on your payroll?"

She tried to wriggle free, but he held her tight. Not only that, he tilted her chin up, looked deep into her eyes, and kissed her.

Hallie stopped struggling. She leaned against him and sighed. "It looks as if I didn't have much option," she said softly. "Between you and Tige— He and grandmother are sitting beside the fire we built outside the root house door, by the way, and grandmother has tied a nice white bandage around his head. She says the bullet only creased his skull—"

"I'm not interested in Tige at present, darling," he said. He laid his rough, warm cheek against hers. "Not but what he has good instincts—he took to you almost as soon as I did!"

"Sooner," Hallie murmured.

He kissed her forehead, just under the fringe of her wind-blown hair.

"When I opened my eyes, right in the first moment when I lay looking at you, I knew sometime I'd hold you this way and that you'd put your arms around my neck and kiss me."

Hallie did.

THE END.

Daughter of the west

by Richard Hill Wilkinson

A Four-Part Novel—

Conclusion

VII.

DIANE stood as though stunned. Slowly, like a stimulant creeping through her and taking its effect, the full import of Alf Meeker's words and all they signified came to her.

Her eyes had fled to the man on the couch, and she found him watching her steadily, his expression denying nothing, asking nothing. The same twisted smile was still on his lips.

A voice that Diane did not recognize as her own, spoke:

"You can't be Ray Slater. You can't be! Ray Slater murdered Sam Lund. A dozen men saw him do it. And . . . and you—" She stopped, a hideous, terrifying

From violence and death, two people learn the lesson of living.

thought suddenly stabbing through her.

She had been about to say that the man on the couch couldn't have murdered Sam Lund because she had been with him, in his arms, at the moment Lund was killed.

A sudden dizziness assailed her and she leaned against the wall for support. She heard a step, and Alf was beside her, his arm about her shoulder.

"Steady, Di. Just take it easy now. Things are going to work out all right."

His voice came from a great distance. She tried to answer him, to adjust her vision, but things in the room became detached, swam and reeled crazily. She reached out for something solid to hold on to, and her fingers caught in Alf Meeker's shirt and intertwined themselves there.

Far, far away, she heard Ray Slater's voice:

"Poor kid, she's played out. She must have been living under a terrific strain. Then I came along—" The rest of the sentence and Alf Meeker's reply was a blurred jumble of sound.

She felt herself being picked up and carried somewhere. She heard a door open and close. She felt the softness of a bed, and wondered vaguely where she was. Then she heard footsteps receding and the closing of another door.

She took a deep breath and let her whole body relax.

Diane had no idea how long she slept. Reaction to all the strain and worry, coupled with wakeful nights, had completely robbed her body of its vitality and energy.

Once she roused up. It was pitch-dark. She lay for a long time in a state midway between slumber and wakefulness. Half currents and fragmentary thoughts passed and repassed through her mind. Ted had sworn that he was a witness to the killing of Sam Lund. He was willing to let an innocent man die for another's crime. Memory of Ted's terror came to her, of his jumpy nerves, of his eagerness to get across the border.

The awful truth bore down upon her. She shuddered, closed her eyes and shut her mind to all thoughts, feelings and sound.

Sunlight was streaming into the room when she awoke the second time. She glanced at her watch. It was ten o'clock in the morning. She looked around and saw that she was in the ranch's spare room. A blanket had been thrown over her. The window was open.

She lay still, listening, but no sound came to her ears. After a while she rose, feeling strangely refreshed but weak. She went into the bathroom, showered and dressed in riding clothes. A half-formed plan was already taking shape in her mind.

She went out into the living room, hesitated before the door to her own bedroom, then with an impulsive gesture, opened it and entered.

The bed was empty! It was made up neatly. There was no sign of it having been occupied.

Fear clutching at her heart, she

ran back through the living room and out onto the veranda. Down near the bunkhouse, Alf Meeker was sitting cross-legged in the sun, mending a section of harness.

She called to him, and then sat down suddenly on the top step of the veranda because the effort had made her weak. She was amazed at her own lack of strength.

Alf was coming swiftly across the yard. Deep concern lined his features.

"Di! What the devil are you doing out here? Get back to bed. I—"

"Never mind about me. I'm all right." She stared up at him wretchedly. "What have you done with Ray Slater? Where is he?"

"Oh!" Alf stared down at her, a curious expression on his face. He said slowly, casually, "I moved him into Ted's room. Figured a man would be more comfortable in a man's room."

Relief was so strong in her that she almost fainted again. Alf reached down and helped her to her feet.

"Come. You need something to eat."

They went into the kitchen and Diane sat down at the table near the window, while Alf put coffee on to boil and broke eggs into a frying pan.

Diane asked, a catch in her voice, "Is . . . is Mr. Slater all right?"

"Yeah, he's coming alone fine." Alf poured milk in with the eggs and began beating the mixture with a fork. "I didn't dare leave him alone. Now that you're better, I can ride to town."

"Ride to town? What for?"

He gave her a surprised look, then turned his attention back to the frying pan.

"Why, the thing we've got to do is pretty plain, isn't it? Harboring a criminal is against the law."

"He isn't a criminal. Ray Slater didn't murder Sam Lund." Her voice was low and tense. She was clutching the edge of the table with both hands.

"No?" Alf dumped the contents of the frying pan onto a plate and set the plate before her. He poured coffee into a cup and placed it beside the plate. Diane ignored them both.

"Did you hear me? Ray Slater didn't murder Sam Lund."

"Better eat your victuals," Alf told her, his voice unimpressed. "Afterward we can talk."

She forced herself to eat some of the food. Inwardly, she was trembling. In a moment she would have to make a decision. It was inevitable, inescapable. The delay was torture.

She looked up and found that Alf had lighted his pipe. He had placed both elbows on the table and was watching her with a bright gleam in his old eyes.

"Di, how do you know that Ray Slater didn't murder Lund?"

"Because I was with him at the time the murder was committed. I didn't know who he was at the time." She lifted her head, two bright spots staining her cheeks. "We were at the White Owl Saloon,

in an ante-room there, alone. He was kissing me at the very moment that the shot was fired."

"Ah!" The word was a whispered sigh. Alf rose and went over to the stove. When he turned there was such a look of relief in his expression that Diane cried accusingly:

"You didn't believe Ray Slater was guilty, Alf Mecker! You knew he wasn't. You tricked me into saying that!"

He nodded, his eyes suddenly gentle.

"That's right. Neither Crass nor I believed him guilty. We needed proof, though." He shook the bowl of his pipe toward the ash pit of the stove, then tamped the remaining coals down with his finger. "If I had believed Slater guilty, I would have ridden into town yesterday and got the sheriff."

"Yesterday?" Diane stared at him blankly. And then a shocking thought occurred to her. "Alf, how long have I been asleep?"

"Why"—Alf lifted his eyebrows in mild curiosity—"today's Thursday. I put you to bed Tuesday night."

"Thursday!" Her mouth suddenly felt dry. So that accounted for her weakened condition. She stared at Alf like one seeing a ghost. "It can't be Thursday. It can't be! Ted will think—I told him—" She broke off, her eyes suddenly stricken with misery.

Alf came swiftly across the room. "What about Ted? What were you going to say? Where is he?" He seized her roughly by the shoulder. "Tell me."

"I can't! I promised. He's going away. Oh, Alf—"

"Listen, girl!" Alf's voice was a hoarse rasp, so intense with feeling that she could only stare at him. "It was Ted who murdered Sam Lund. You know it and so do I. We've been trying to pretend we didn't. We've been trying to kid ourselves that his jumpy nerves and the fact that he always carried a gun was natural. All the time we both knew the truth. For a while I was willing to respect your fanatic desire to protect that no-good brother of yours. I kept living in hopes that you'd come to your senses. I was even willing to wait until Ray Slater was captured and sentenced to die, hoping then that your conscience would at last come to your rescue.

"Well, the way the thing is now, there'll probably never be any trial. That posse is not really a posse. It's a lynching party. Soon's they catch up with Slater, and believe me they will, they'll lynch him, because that's what folks want. They want to end this business right now and go on building the dam and forget the things that have happened."

Alf released his grip and stood away. "So it's up to you. It's either your brother, or the man you love."

"Man I love?"

Alf made an impatient gesture. "Di, for gosh sake, why don't you be honest with yourself for once? Why don't you admit the facts and face them?" He leaned forward, bracing both hands on the table. "You do love him, don't you?"

"Yes. Oh, Alf, you are right. You're right about everything. I haven't had the courage to face facts. I've been so confused and mixed up. I haven't known where to turn or what to do. I've hated myself, and there's been nothing I could do about it. Only this morning—"

"This morning?"

"I woke up and lay in bed and thought it all out. The truth was pretty hard to take, but I couldn't deny it any longer. I knew what I was going to do before I got out of bed. That's why, without realizing it, I dressed for riding." She dropped her head suddenly and there were tears in her eyes. "I was going to ride into town and tell Sheriff Shumway the truth."

Alf Meeker stood still and looked at the girl, and suddenly all the hardness left his face. His eyes were gentle and a warmth stole through him. He had kept faith in this girl and she had justified that faith, and that was all he wanted.

He started toward her and stopped, flinging up his head. A horse had clattered into the yard outside. Diane said, "Who's that?" And they both crossed the kitchen floor to the window that opened onto the yard.

There was a horse there, a black, sweat-streaked and blowing hard. It was ground-tied and its saddle was empty.

Diane's breath caught in her throat. "It's Ted's horse. He must have—"

Just then the kitchen door burst open. They whirled and saw Ted standing on the threshold. He held a gun in his hand. There was a wild, savage gleam in his eyes. His teeth were bared.

"Ted!" Diane took a step forward, and Ted's gun came up, pointing directly at her head.

"Stop right where you are! Don't move, either of you." His voice was a snarl. His dark eyes darted from one face to the other. There was danger in those eyes, the danger of a man who had thrown all caution and reason to one side, whose entire being was consumed by the one, self-centered instinct of preservation.

"So you tried to double-cross me, eh? You got me to go up there to Eagle Rock and then told me to wait till you brought food and money. You figured I'd be fool enough to believe your lies, that I'd stay there until you had time to notify the sheriff so he could smoke me out. Well, I'm not that much of a fool."

"Ted!" Diane's voice was a cry of anguish, a plea. "That isn't so! You know it isn't so! Oh, Ted, Ted, whatever brought you to this?"

"So it isn't so?" Ted's voice held a taunting laugh. "You weren't going to turn me over to the sheriff, eh? I got the whole thing wrong? You were going to help me get away. Is that right?"

And Alf Meeker demanded harshly, "What would she want to turn you over to the sheriff for? You done something wrong, have you, son?"

"Damn you, Alf!" Ted swung his gun so that it covered Alf's broad chest. "You know damn well

what I've done. You both know it. You've known it all along. We've been kidding each other, pretending that everything was all right. I was a fool to wait this long. I should have known that sooner or later you'd weaken and give me up. I was fool enough to believe my sister would be loyal to her own brother, no matter what he'd done."

"Ted! Dear Heaven, believe me when I say I wanted to be convinced that you were innocent. I tried. I wouldn't let myself think you capable of murder. It was only when I became sure, only when there was no possible doubt—"

"Sure?" Ted's eyes darted from one face to the other. "What do you mean, sure?" His lips flattened again. "So that's it? Alf's been working on you. If it weren't for Alf you might have gone on believing, trying to help me. Listen, neither of you gave me a chance. You wouldn't see my side of it at all. I had to kill Lund. Can you understand that? It was my life or his. Merkel would have shot me in cold blood if I'd refused."

The boy's eyes were wild now with a growing fury, a sense of injustice and being wronged. The wild gleam in his eyes was intensified.

"I ought to kill you right now, Alf, for what you've done. Why shouldn't I? If it weren't for you, I might have been able to stay here. Why shouldn't I shoot you down? Two murders are no worse than one."

His voice had risen. He was whipping himself into a rage. He was goading his own courage into doing what he wanted to do.

Diane saw his hand tighten on the gun, and she cried wildly:

"Don't! Ted, don't do it! You can't! Alf's your friend. He's done everything for you that anyone could do. He—"

And just then they heard it—a sound, a cough. It rang through the house like a pistol shot. It struck against Diane's eardrums and congealed the blood in her veins. It stopped her heart from beating and her lungs from breathing.

Ted had jerked his head to one side, cocking it in an attitude of listening. His mouth was open. Slantwise, he looked at them, watching their faces, not being sure.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Something outside." Diane marveled at the casualness of Alf's voice. Alf was not wearing a gun. The nearest gun was a carbine suspended above the fireplace in the living room. He reached into his pocket for his pipe and tobacco.

The gesture was too pat, too casual. Ted's eyes narrowed cunningly. He swung around to face them, swinging his gun, backing toward the living room door.

"Don't move! Don't take a step. Stand just where you are."

He reached the door to the living room, felt behind him and thrust it open. He put his back to the door jamb, his ear turned away from the kitchen. He held his breath, listening.

It was as though the world were standing still, as though they were

"Stop right where you are and don't move, either of you!" he ordered. "You thought you'd double-cross me, did you? Well, I was too smart for you both. You didn't catch me!"

all held in space, waiting. There was no sound, not a breath of movement, nothing.

And then, suddenly, they heard it again. A deep-throated cough, a man's cough unmistakably.

Ted Haroldson's eyes gleamed. He stiffened. He jerked upright, swung his gun toward the door that led to his own bedroom, and took one step across the living room floor.

"Ted!" Diane's vocal cords had at last relaxed enough so that she could make a sound. Every ounce of color had left her cheeks. She raised one hand in a gesture of appeal. "Don't!" she whispered hoarsely. "Don't do anything—"

She started forward, and Ted suddenly stepped into the living room. He banged shut the kitchen door. They heard the lock snap into place. They heard Ted's steps moving methodically across the room toward the bedroom door.

VIII.

Sheriff Mike Shumway pulled in his sorrel on the brow of a low hill. Directly beneath him were the red-roofed buildings of the Staghorn Ranch. The sheriff folded both hands on top of his saddle pommel and eased his position. He was a youngish man, less than forty, with a sandy mustache, bright-blue eyes and a square jaw.

He swung around to face his companion.

"This the place, Crass?"

"That's it," said Crass Fletcher. "End of trail for this man hunt of yours."

"Not so sure," Shumway grunted. He was irritated at his failure to track down Ray Slater, the supposed killer of Sam Lund. Grudgingly, he had admitted that Slater was smart. Five times he'd picked up the hunted man's trail, only to lose it again. It wasn't very flattering to his own prowess as an officer that the hunted man was wounded, without food or water and had still succeeded in eluding him.

He was irritated at the posse, too. Like all posses that are formed from the high-pitched excitement of mob rule, this one was as unreasonable as most. Their bitterness toward the man Slater was vindictive. Gradually, Sheriff Shumway had come to understand that most of the posse was composed of ranchers who had opposed the building of the dam and hated Slater because he had whipped them into line.

Gradually, also, Shumway had begun to wonder if Slater were actually the guilty man. There were facts and evidence against him all right, but there was always the possibility of there being a mistake.

It was when he heard talk of a lynching that he really began to worry. It was his duty to oppose a lynching, but this mob was fanatically in favor of one. He figured he was going to have plenty of trouble with them.

And then, the day before, they had returned to Cradle after fresh supplies, and Crass Fletcher announced the decision of the county authorities about the dam. The

announcement had an astonishing effect on the posse. It appeased them, and all but a few lost complete interest in chasing down a killer who, it began to seem, was going to succeed in eluding them anyhow.

Crass Fletcher revealed other things, too. He produced evidence and witnesses that some members of the posse were in the employ of Trent Merkel, and it was this group that was keeping the posse whipped into its insane fury.

Mike Shumway had mulled this over in his mind and listened to other things that Crass had had to say. He decided to postpone dealing with Merkel until later. But Merkel would certainly be dealt with. There were plenty of charges against him, but the one that Shumway would get the most satisfaction out of pressing was this business of paying a posse to influence people against a suspected murderer. Mike, being a good sheriff, couldn't and wouldn't tolerate that.

So just to make sure that Merkel would be there when he got back, Mike arrested him and left him in charge of Cal Jameson who promised, with a gleam in his old eyes, that Trent would be kept on ice until the sheriff returned.

Then, in the late evening, Mike and Crass Fletcher rode out of town and headed south. Mike hoped that all the things Crass had told him were true. They sounded sensible enough, but he hated to make mistakes.

The two men had started down the slope when Crass suddenly laid his hand on Shumway's arm and said, "Look!"

They sat still and watched a horseman galloping from the west. He was riding a black horse and riding him hard. He was heading directly for the Staghorn.

"That's young Ted," Crass said through tight lips. "It looks like something had happened."

"If he looks up this way," Shumway remarked, "we're sunk."

It was all open country. They did not dare to move, for fear the movement would catch the eye of the galloping horseman. But Ted's attention was obviously concentrated on his destination. He did not once look around. A moment later, he disappeared beneath the cottonwood trees near the ranch.

"We'd better take it easy," Crass said. He urged his horse forward. Shumway followed.

They went down the slope at a diagonal course. They came up behind the ranch, dismounted some distance from the patio and went ahead on foot. They stayed beneath the cottonwoods and stopped at the very edge of the patio.

The sound of voices came to them through the kitchen's open window. Then, suddenly, the voices stopped, and they heard a cough. The cough seemed to come from behind one of the doors that opened off the patio.

Crass Fletcher frowned. He wasn't sure what the setup was. He was sure that that cough couldn't have come from Alf. Alf would be around where things were going on.

Then, suddenly, they heard Diane

cry, "Ted! Don't!" And an instant later, a door banged and they heard footsteps crossing the living room toward the room from behind whose door the cough had come.

Crass didn't wait any longer. He said gruffly, "Come on." He started across the patio. His hand was on the knob of the door that led to the bedroom when he heard the inside door open. He heard a startled exclamation.

Then Crass jerked open the door.

Ted was standing in the center of the room. He had a gun in his hand. He had been staring down at the figure of a man on the bed. His head had come up in blank astonishment when the door to the patio was thrown open.

For a moment, the scene was a tableau. All four of the men remained motionless—Slater on the bed, propped up on one elbow, Ted in the center of the floor, his gun half raised, staring at Crass, who had paused with one foot inside the room, and Sheriff Shumway, standing just behind Crass, peering over his shoulder.

It was the sound of the kitchen door that led to the patio being jerked open, followed by the sound of running feet, that broke the spell.

Ted Haroldson spoke an oath, lifted his gun and fired. The bullet ploughed into the fleshy part of Crass' arm and he dropped his gun, cursing, plunging forward on his face to avoid further shots.

Sheriff Shumway swung his own gun up, but had to hold his fire momentarily to avoid hitting Crass. When Crass' body was finally out of the way, the officer found himself staring straight down the barrel of young Ted's gun.

The man on the bed, Slater, rolled over then, swinging his good arm. He hit Ted hard enough so that the boy's second bullet was deflected, and Shumway had a chance to fire.

The officer let drive twice. Through the veil of smoke that ballooned into the room, he saw Ted pitch forward, falling halfway across the bed. Then a shot came out of that veil of smoke and a bullet whipped so close to Shumway's cheek that he could feel its wind.

Vaguely, without having it register on his conscious thought, he heard a girl's voice call, "Ted! Ted!" Then Shumway fired again and kept on firing, throwing shot after shot into the dim, sprawling figure that now lay on the floor of the bedroom.

Suddenly, there was silence. An awful, deadly silence coming on the heels of that sound and confusion. Blue smoke rolled out through the bedroom door. The smell of burned gunpowder was sharp and acrid.

The silence was broken by the sobbing cry of a girl.

Then a voice in the bedroom said, "O. K. He's dead."

Ray Slater sat in a comfortable chair on the tree-shaded veranda of the Staghorn. He was shaved and wore clean clothes. His dark hair was combed. One arm was in a sling and in his other hand he held a smoking cigarette.

He was watching two people standing together down near the corral. They were Alf Meeker and Diane Haroldson. Presently, the foreman nodded and turned away and the girl started toward the veranda. The sun glinted on her bright hair.

Watching her, Ray Slater felt something warm and good stirring within him. He threw away his cigarette with an automatic gesture, and he was smiling when the girl came up the steps.

She paused and looked at him and a slow color came into her cheeks.

"How's the arm today?"

"Practically as good as new. Tomorrow I'm throwing this sling away."

She came over to examine the arm, bending over him so that he could not see her face. Her lips were pursed judiciously.

"Well, perhaps," she said, and looked up directly into his eyes, and the flush in her cheeks deepened at what she saw there.

"Diane."

"Yes."

"There's something— Would it help for you to know that Ted had his chance to kill me, and didn't take it?"

She stared at him and he went on, "It justifies your faith in him, doesn't it? He knew that by killing me he would save his own life because it was I who was accused of Lund's murder." He took her hand and held it tightly. "He was a good kid. I'm sure of that. I know." He paused and swallowed hard. "I understand the restlessness, the wildness that haunted him all the days of his life. I had it, too. It's something—it's worse than a disease. You go to any lengths to satisfy it. That's why—well, that's why I took the job I did. It was the only way I could keep myself from doing what Ted did."

Her lips were slightly parted and her eyes were warm with gratitude.

"But," she faltered, "what about the future?"

"That depends upon you. It's a pity that Ted couldn't have discovered what I did—an answer to all his wanting for inner peace. An answer that I never knew existed until I kissed you that night in the White Owl." Again he hesitated. "Can you understand that, Diane? Do you know what I'm talking about? Does it mean anything to you?"

"It means everything." Her cheeks were flushed again and her eyes were bright. "I understand, my darling. You'll never have to want again."

THE END.

EXIT THE KID

by Beatrice Shaw Chapel

It sure beats all how that skinny runt of a kid took me for a ride—and not on no hoss neither!

THEY call me Tucson account I was born in that Arizona town, but I've put in most of my time in Montana until I came to Oregon where I'm livin' now on the banks of the Snake River. I haven't got much of a place. Just a one-room shack and a corral, but it suits old Patch and me fine. You see, Patch is my pinto. At one time he was the liveliest critter you ever did see. That was when we were workin' for Ike Branstetter on his spread in Montana and when I was coppin' big money in the rodeos. All that is in the past now. Patch and me are both growin' old. I'm sixty-five and Patch— I've forgot just how old Patch really is. Fact is, I'm forgettin' lots of things lately. It seems, though, that old Patch has always been around. Got him from Branstetter. Ike didn't want him. He was off breed for him. He specialized in palominos. You know the kind I mean—them beautiful golden hosses. The palominos always made me think of Ike Branstetter's wife. She was a tall, slim, blond woman—a high-stepper, just like the hosses. Ike married her in the East. She never cared for the West and ranch life. She never rode a hoss, just drove a big car. When Ike died, she sold the ranch and went back East to live.

That's how I come to notice the Kid. He was ridin' a palomino in the parade. He was a skinny little runt—the Kid, not the hoss. He wasn't especially good-lookin'. I didn't notice his looks at first, because I was all eyes for that golden hoss. When the fair and rodeo comes to town every fall, me and old Patch always amble down the line of march with the rest of the cowpokes. Of course, I don't enter any of the contests, but I can still lend a hand at the chutes. This day

Thunder Boy tried all the tricks he knew, but the Kid stuck to him like a bur.

that I first saw the Kid, I was ridin' 'longside a big, tall, rangy boy. I reckon we both was interested in the same thing because he turned to me and said:

"Some hoss."

I replied, "You said it. Who is the boy ridin' him?"

"He's called the Kid. Been makin' all the rodeos this fall and pullin' down first money."

"What do they call you, pard-

ner?" I asked. "You're new around here, ain't you?"

The big fellow grinned. "Yep. I've never been in Oregon before. I'm from Oklahoma. That's what they call me—Oklahoma."

"They call me Tucson," I told him. "I had another name once, but darned if I ain't almost forgot it."

Oklahoma laughed, showing even white teeth. "Same here," he said.

"What do you go in for?" I asked him.

"Everything," he told me. "Bareback, bucking, calf roping and bulldogging."

That's how I met Oklahoma. Just then the band started to play and the parade moved on.

The first day of the fair was a lucky one for the Kid. He won three races with that palomino. He was second in the calf ropin'—Oklahoma won first in that. The Kid kept his seat till the whistle blowed on three of the orneriest hosses I ever saw in the bareback and buckin' contests. Gosh but the Kid could ride! He was all decked out in a big white hat, a red satin shirt and leather chaps. They never had to lift him off when the time was up. He didn't need their help. He'd just slide off easy, always landin' on his feet. He was playin' to the grandstand and the folks were all for him. They gave him a big hand and yelled themselves hoarse every time he won out. That was the first day. The second was about like the first, with the Kid gettin' all the breaks. There was somethin' disturbin' to me about that Kid. Some way, his face looked familiar to me, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out where I'd seen him before. Oklahoma and the Kid had sort of teamed up. Most of the time they were together. They looked like the long and short of it.

The evenin' of the second day, there was trouble downtown in front of the Palm Pool Hall. There was another rider—Joe Ballard was his name—who had been top boy at the rodeo every year, but this time his luck seemed to have gone back on him. The Kid was stealin' the show and Joe was sore about it. He was standin' in the doorway of the Palm when Oklahoma and the Kid came down the street. I was walkin' right behind them bound for a card game in the Palm. Just as the Kid was goin' past him, Joe lurched forward. He had an ugly look on his face which never was pretty and he began cussin' the Kid and callin' him all the low-down names he could think of. Joe was a hefty cuss—weighed about a hundred and ninety. The Kid was bantam. So when Joe bore down on him with blood in his eye, the Kid sort of drew back. This seemed to tickle Joe to death. I reckon he figured he had the Kid scared. Well, maybe he did. The Kid appeared to be lookin' around for a way out of the situation. Well, that was where Oklahoma came in.

I don't recall the exact conversation between Oklahoma and Joe, but Oklahoma let fly with his right

and, the next minute, Joe was layin' there on the sidewalk sort of rubbin' his jaw to find out if it was still in one piece. Oklahoma was standin' there waitin' for him to get up, and the Kid—why, the Kid was gone. Now, that was gratitude, I told myself. That was all there was to the fight. Joe got up and ambled down the street and Oklahoma and I went into the Palm.

I didn't ride in the parade the third day. Had a touch of rheumatism in my left knee and old Patch didn't seem to have much ambition, so I left him home in the corral and caught a ride into town with Johnny Snow who was goin' in in his old jellopy. This last day was to be the day of days. This was the day that the outlaw hoss, Thunder Boy, would come charging out of the chute with some cowboy on him who was plumb certain to take a spill in the dirt. No one had ever been able to stay on him yet. I figured that today would not be an exception. There was tension about the chutes. Each cowboy was wonderin' if he would draw that bundle of red-hot hell and if he could stay on the minute and a half and earn that hundred dollars.

Oklahoma had rode in the parade beside the Kid that day and now they were standin' near Chute 6, talkin'. I saw the Kid accept a light for his cigarette. As I looked at the Kid, that idea that I had seen him before began devilin' me again, but still I couldn't place him. Later, when the Kid roped a calf and stood there waitin' for the applause which was sure deafenin', somethin' seemed to connect in my brain. I knew now who the Kid made me think of—Ike Branstetter. Oh, shucks, I told myself, that was no good. Branstetter hadn't ever had a son. The band started playin' then, and the music made me wish that I was young again and a buckaroo. This train of thought was cut by the voice of the announcer over the loud-speaker. He was sayin':

"The Kid on Thunder Boy out of Chute No. 4."

The crowd went wild then, but I turned sort of cold all over. The Kid! No, that couldn't be. That would be murder. Why, Thunder Boy was a killer and the Kid was—

well, just a kid even if he was a good rider. Now there was an ominous silence from the grandstand. They were waiting. So far the Kid had been lucky, but would that luck still hold?

I walked over to Chute No. 4. Oklahoma was there. His face looked sort of white and drawn. He was talking to the Kid. He seemed to be urging something. The Kid just laughed and shook his head. Now he was climbing the rails. Inside the chute, the boys were trying to hold that wall-eyed devil Thunder Boy. He had a big Roman nose and he sure looked ugly. He jerked his head and snorted his disdain for the creatures who were trying to make him do something which he did not wish to do at all. When he saw the Kid coming over the top rail, he cut up worse than ever. Any thoughts of backing out by the Kid were squashed when Joe drawled:

"If you're afraid, Kid, I'll ride him for you."

The Kid's lips settled into a thin, straight line. He said in that husky voice of his:

"I do my own ridin', cowboy."

The band stopped playin' just then and the announcer's voice came again:

"The Kid on Thunder Boy out of Chute No. 4."

He kept repeatin' this over and over. And then the Kid was in the saddle and the gate swung open. The crowd rose to its feet with a roar. Out in the dust Thunder Boy was doing his stuff. All the dirty tricks he was able to think of. He knew 'em all and he tried 'em all, but the Kid was sticking like a bur to that saddle. He held the reins slack with his left hand. With the other he was fannin' him with that big white hat of his. The folks went plumb wild.

How he managed it I don't know, but the Kid was still in the saddle when the whistle blew and, as the riders closed in, he tried his usual stunt of slidin' to the ground and not askin' help from anyone. But he hadn't reckoned on the hellishness of Thunder Boy. It all happened in a flash. Thunder Boy gave one last jump and was away down the field, kickin' his heels at every step. And the Kid? He just lay there in the dirt, the most pitiful little bundle you ever saw. He made an effort to get up, but fell back. I started runnin' toward him, but Oklahoma was there before I was. I heard him ask:

"You hurt, Kid?"

And the Kid said, "My leg's broke."

The announcer was bawling for the crowd to stand back, to give the Kid air. A few minutes later, when the ambulance drove onto the field, Oklahoma picked the Kid up as though he had been a baby. There was a few minutes of shocked silence after Oklahoma and the Kid had gone, and then another rider came from Chute No. 5, was thrown and went walking back. The show was going on.

I figured I'd seen enough. As I went outside, I heard the announcer

calling for Oklahoma, but Oklahoma was otherwise engaged. I hung around outside the grandstand till Johnny came out. Then I asked him to take me to the hospital. At the hospital, the nurse told me that the Kid was resting easily. His friend was with him. Yes, I might go up for a few minutes if I would not excite the Kid.

Excite the Kid? When I opened the door very quietly, the two people—the Kid on the bed and the tall cowboy, Oklahoma, standing beside it, did not hear me. A red spot burned in each of the Kid's cheeks. His eyes, which were raised to Oklahoma's were bright with tears. I heard him ask:

"When did you first know? Was it when you picked me up?"

And Oklahoma's reply, "Hell, no, Kid—I mean Bonnie. I knew it the first day I saw you. I knew that I loved you then, too. You haven't said yet if you love me."

"I love you, Oklahoma," said the Kid huskily.

Oklahoma bent over the bed and I—well, I closed the door and came away. As I told you before, I'm gettin' old and don't remember maybe as good as I used to, but memories was sure crowdin' me then. I was rememberin' a little girl who spent her summers on the Branstetter ranch but her winters at a school back East. Bonnie—the Kid was Bonnie Branstetter and, despite the raisin' given her by her ma, she was still Ike Branstetter's daughter.

THE END.

SCARLET TANAGER

My world was wrapped in snowdrift,
And the low hills closed me in,
And loneliness lay on my heart
Like a heavy weight of sin.

Then flashing in the sunlight,
A scarlet tanager flew
And pierced my loneliness, lifting it
With a burning thought of you!

ISABEL FORNER WEDDON.

PHIL ANSCO, RUSTLER

by Lytle Shannon

While Jake Leeson was a-searchin' for his rustled cattle, his daughter was a-searchin' for her rustled heart.

DANCING with Bart Morgan, her father's foreman, Bette Leeson was suddenly aware of a stir in the gayly whirling room, of heads turning, of eyes focused, startled, upon the door.

"Phil Ansco!" she heard, in amazed accents, then saw a tall, lithe figure in brown whipcord sauntering into the room.

Her hazel eyes widened, something wild and primitive shot through her veins. It was Phil, the same lean bronzed face, gay reckless eyes under waving rusty hair, devil-may-care air that, in the five years he had been gone, had assumed the confidence of many dangers safely passed.

"Of all the nerve!" ejaculated her partner. "We ought to throw him right out!"

"Why?" demanded Bette.

"Why? A rustler like him?" retorted Bart indignantly.

"There's no proof that he's a rustler," flashed Bette, with a toss of her red-gold curls.

"There isn't, eh?" challenged Bart. "Hasn't rustling been worse the few weeks he's been back? Isn't everybody on their toes watching their cattle? What does your father think? Why else did he throw up that drift fence between his and the old Ansco free ranges? Because it's always been so mighty easy for the Anscos to drive the cattle they rustled from him into the Brakes behind their place!"

"Oh, I know Phil's father rustled unbranded cattle from us, but dad did the same to him," retorted Bette defensively. "There's always been

bad blood between us."

"Anyhow, things were a lot more peaceful the five years Phil was away," argued Bart. "He threw in with a gang of rustlers when he went. If only he'd stayed away instead of coming back and starting things again."

Bette's glance went to Phil standing in careless grace against the wall, a cigarette in his hand. His return to his old Arizona birth place had certainly stirred things up. He had waited a year after his father's death to come back. Nobody had thought he would ever return, the way the Ansco holdings had dwindled and shrunk. But here he was, trailed by a reputation for rustling, for quick shooting, for everything that stood for danger and recklessness.

Well, whatever he had done, he looked as if he had lived life to the full, concluded Bette rebelliously. Suddenly, a very devil of recklessness swept her, taunting her, daring her. To make him forget for a brief space that they were enemies by birth and tradition, that she was a Leeson and he an Ansco! She would! Let them all think what they would.

Gliding past him, her piquant face an alluring smile, she caught his cool, roving eye, held it with a look that was a deliberate invitation. She saw his eyes flash, his fingers toss aside the cigarette. Then she was trembling so that her feet began to falter. For with quick, decisive steps he was following her, had taken her from Bart's possessive arms. When Bart saw who had cut in, his eyes flashed with anger.

"Bette! Why, Bette!" he stuttered, standing still and staring after them.

But Bette, dancing to those smooth, quick steps, felt life singing a song in her blood. She felt

as if she had achieved the greatest triumph of her life. With sudden tremor she lifted her eyes to Phil's, and something sprang alive in her, something a little terrifying, but exciting and delightful. A moment and she had decided her rôle—to be friends, to forget for this brief space that they were enemies born, to live while the guitars played that lilting, luring love tune.

"That music!" she breathed rapturously.

"Beautiful!" agreed Phil softly, and her tension eased.

Evidently, he had fallen in with the rôle she had elected to play.

"You've been gone a long time," she ventured.

"Quite a spell," he agreed lightly.

"Come back to stay?" she asked, and a hint of wariness tightened his smile.

"That depends," he stipulated.

"It'll be nice having a neighbor there again," she went on.

"Thanks. Kinda like the prospect myself," he returned meaningly.

"You'll be neighborly and call?" She dimpled daringly.

"I'd sure like to," he returned, his bantering lightness lost in a wistfulness of tone that made her lift startled eyes.

The blaze of bitterness in his pierced her with poignant regret. It was gone in a moment, but in that moment she knew that she wanted nothing in life so much as to have no barrier between them. Rebellion swept her, rebellion against circumstances, against their fathers who had created this barrier.

Abruptly, she saw that they were the only couple on the floor, that the eyes of the room were on them. She saw Bart, his face flushed and angry, walk to the orchestra leader and snap out an order. The music crashed to a close, halting their steps in the middle of a bar. But Phil, holding up his hand, called to the leader:

"Hi, friend, just a couple more turns around the room, will you?" and despite his attractive smile, something in his voice made it a command.

Hastily, the orchestra resumed the air, and again they were circling the room. Bette's heart was thumping wildly, and she felt as if she were dancing on dynamite. Then Phil had led her to a seat, bowed, walked to the door.

He was in the center of the floor when Bart stepped directly before him, said something which Bette could not hear. But Phil's reply, clear and even, rang out like a challenge:

"You mean you like my room better than my company."

The place was suddenly still, all eyes and craning necks.

"Yes, if you put it that way," blustered Bart, his voice not quite steady.

A moment, then the tension of the room snapped to Phil's drawl:

"Nice welcome for the prodigal returned."

"Well, we're not exactly killing the fatted calf," retorted Bart.

"No. In fact, about the only mark of welcome I've noticed is that drift fence you've thrown up

between those old free ranges we used to fight over." Phil grinned.

Bette felt herself go hot and cold with shame. Then he knew of that insult her father had intended by that fence!

"Reckon it's a slap in the face at me," Phil went on. "But I seem to remember something about turning the other cheek. I—"

"That fence isn't a joke to us," snapped Bart.

"No? But it is a joke," returned Phil with a laugh. "Fact is, I've been wanting to see you about that fence."

"Yes?"

To Bette, it seemed as if the whole room was one huge question mark.

"Yes. Just to warn you that it won't stop the rustling," was the astounding reply.

"It won't?" Bart's voice was an incredulous groping.

"No. A few strands of wire! Why, a good shot'd blast it to hell! A wire-cutter'd snap it to bits," explained Phil, as if entirely unaware of the eyes drilling him.

"You seem to know all the tricks of the trade," sneered Bart.

"Don't you? You ought to. Haven't you charge of the Leeson herds?" asked the other.

"Yes, and I intend to keep a close eye on them, too," was the retort.

"Well, you'll need to, take a tip from me," returned Phil nonchalantly.

There was a gasp from someone.

"Sounds like a threat of what we may expect," sneered Bart, with a glance around the room.

Silence fell like a stroke. Bette saw the ropelike muscles stand out on Phil's clenched jaw, the steel glitter of his eyes turned on his adversary. Before their impact Bart's hand moved involuntarily toward his hip. Phil made the merest motion of command.

"Hold it!" he snapped, not raising his voice, but keeping it clear and strong.

Then, swinging toward the door, he called back:

"Another time, hombre, I'll give you a chance to eat your words!"

When he had disappeared through the door, the eased tension of the room was as palpable as a sigh of relief. But the sound of galloping hoofs rangs out before voices broke loose:

"I see where we put a guard on that fence," swaggered Bart, who was looking rather washed out, however.

"Better, seeing's you been forewarned, Bart."

"I never! Practically owned to the rustling right there."

"Reckon we'd best all have an eye on our cattle."

"String him up fust thing and we'd save ourselves a lot of trouble!"

"Oh, you all do a fine job o' talkin' now he's not here!" cut in a girl's voice scornfully. "I notice you held your hand when he told you to."

"If it'd been any other place—" blustered Bart, but the girl retorted:

"Lucky for you it wasn't! They say he goes into action lightning fast."

Riding back to the ranch after the dance, Bette was fully aware of Bart's simmering rage at her. For though he rode beside her, he addressed himself to the men riding behind, talking in a high and mighty tone about his encounter with Phil.

Bette was glad to be left alone. Her encounter with Phil had taken her breath. What manner of man could he be? He was bold certainly, outrageously bold. Could he have meant what he said tonight, to have his words taken as they sounded? He knew how everybody felt toward him, that he was branded as a rustler throughout the country, yet he had come to the dance tonight, danced as if he had not a care in the world. He had been charming to her, yet he knew why her father had thrown up that drift fence. What game was he playing after his prodigal return?

He was a cool customer. If he were a rustler, it was probably for the thrill and the daring of it. One could see that risk and danger were the very breath of life to his nostrils. Recalling his threat to Bart tonight, a delicious excitement raced through her. If the old Ansco-Leeson feud broke out again he would put up a wild, glorious fight. The Brakes, those badlands behind his ranch that had been the scene of that old conflict, would wake again to red-blooded, he-man fighting. She had a feeling that anything might happen, that tonight she had witnessed the opening scene of a blood-stirring drama.

At noon the next day, she woke to the clamor of angry voices at the corrals. Running to the window, a passing cowboy told her that last night the drift fence her father had thrown up had been cut and a herd of fifty or so of their cattle driven into the Brakes. Dumbfounded, she stared after the man as he hurried back to the corrals. She could see her father there, irate, defiant, the center of the group. The unanimous conclusion seemed to be that Phil Ansco was at the bottom of this. One and another voiced his opinion:

"No wonder he was so cocky talkin' to you the way he did, Bart."

"I said right then he practically owned to the rustling."

"The gall of him, bragging right to our faces!"

"Even if he did have the nerve to go to that dance, he needn't think he's bluffing me!" declared Bart.

"Why didn't you bore him right there?" stormed her father. "Fine foreman you are, lettin' him talk like that! Lettin' him laugh in your face! Now we'll be the laughingstock o' the whole country!"

"'Twas no place for gunplay," protested Bart, but Jake Leeson broke in:

"Buckle on your guns and pile into your saddles, every consarned one of you! We're goin' right into them Brakes, get them cattle back if we have to start a rustler war to do it! No Ansco's gonna make a fool o' me!"

"Hadn't we best get a word to the

sheriff?" suggested Bart, but Jake retorted:

"Sheriff be damned! I'll handle this myself. Come on, you all! Come on!"

As she watched the crew ride off, indignant rage shook Bette. Of course, they must get the cattle back. Yes, no matter at what cost. To let Ansco put it over on them like that? Never! Phil had made fools of them all right, talking to Bart as he did last night. His very charm of manner toward her was a taunt. And to think that all the while he had had this planned, planned to make them the laughing-stock of this country! She had been a fool! Just to be a man, to go out and fight him herself!

For the rest of the day she seethed restlessly about the place, too angry and upset to settle to anything. Night closed in, bringing no word of her father and the men. She grew more and more nervous, afraid of what might have happened to them in the badlands. She tried to bolster her courage by picturing wild deeds that covered the name of Leeson with glory, that wiped the last of the Anscos from the map.

Sitting before the blazing fireplace, she finally dozed off, lost herself in cloudy dreams, dreams in which guitars played a seductive waltz while she danced in the clasp of steel-strong arms. Eyes smiled upon her, eyes magnetic, daring and gay, filling her with a wild sweet warmth, a sense of alluring adventure. Just to go on dreaming, dreaming forever! Perhaps they had him all wrong. Perhaps he was not guilty as they thought. Drifting between waking and sleeping she was conscious of clinging desperately to that hope, fighting the threat of cold reality. Abruptly, the rattling echo of a shot crashed through her dreams. She started up, shrank back, her hand over her eyes.

Morning brought her father and the crew. But they brought no cattle back, and were rather silent about what had happened. It was Tim, their oldest rider, who enlightened Bette.

"They run a sandy on us," he confided. "They split the herd two-three times, and the bunch we finally come up with, they didn't amount to much. Your dad, he was fit to be tied! He raged and took on till some one o' them damned rustlers fired from cover and shot the hat clean off'n his head! They had the drop on us, so we just had to turn tail and ride back. Had a job gettin' the old man to come, but—"

"Oh, Tim, can't we talk him out of this?" cried Bette, white-faced and frightened. "He'll be killed in there!"

"Nothin' in the world'd turn him from it now," asserted the old cowpoke. "Don't blame him. We can't let the whole country have the laugh on us. No, we're going right out again."

"That Phil Ansco! If only he'd never come back!" Bette said passionately.

"He's sure raised hell," agreed

Tim, moving toward the corrals.

As she again watched the crew ride off, a cold fear gripped Bette. What would happen this time?

It was next morning before the suspense of her long wait snapped at sight of two men riding in, bringing a third, drooping and swaying in the saddle. Terrified, she ran to meet them. The injured man was Tim. His horse had stumbled, landing him down on some jagged rocks, the others explained. Yes, they had come up with some of the rustlers, had had quite a clash with them, had sent them hunting cover. Her father and the rest would be along soon.

Bette helped them bring Tim into the house where she got him to bed. A stiff swig of brandy acted as a bracer, brought him to.

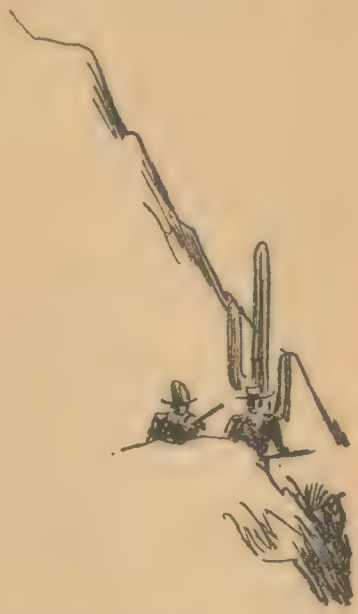
"Know what?" he began, as Bette fussed over him. "Reckon I was pretty groggy from the jolt I got landing on them rocks. Don't know how long I laid there. Reckon I might been laying there yet if somebody hadn't come along. Anyhow, I felt somebody pick me up, carry me. Guess I sorta went off again, for the next thing I knowed there was cold water on my lips, my head. Nothin' ever felt so good. Musta brought me to a little. It's like a dream that I seen his face afore he turned and went, but I'll swear it was young Ansco. Then a little after, your dad come along and found me right by the trail."

There was a sudden roaring in Bette's ears, a lightness in her head.

"Did you tell dad?" she managed to ask.

Tim shook his head.

"I couldn't. He'd only took after Phil an' Heaven knows what'd ha' happened then. But you can't tell me. He isn't all bad, that Ansco lad. I mighta died there on them rocks. And tell you another thing



—he coulda picked your dad off right easy if he'd a mind to."

Bette turned and walked unsteadily to the window. She was glowing and tingling, trembling so that she could scarcely stand. Why this gladness, this lightness of heart

quivering through her, this sunburst of happiness sweeping her clean of the bitterness she had harbored against Phil? The swift wave of color over face and neck answered her.

"He's not all bad! He's not all bad!" her heart was singing.

That singing broke with a jar at the sight of her father at the corrals, his crew around him.

"We got Whitey, one o' the rustlers," he announced exultantly. "He's talked. I had it figgered down pat. Young Ansco was behind that raid. He furnishes the rustlers supplies from his place. Now, listen here. I want to get him. No shootin' or stringing him up. In the pen's where I want him, in stripes, a good long term. I want the laugh

Bette had ridden for some distance when a shot hit a rock close beside her. "Stick 'em up!" snarled a voice. "What are you doin' here, anyhow, and what do you want in this wilderness?"

on him the way he's had it on me."

A cold shiver went through Bette. She never had seen her father like this, so grim and hard with hate. He turned to Bart.

"Tonight, you and Hank lay for him at the edge o' the Brakes where that trail goes in from his place," he charged the foreman. "Whitey said he'd be takin' in supplies to the rustlers after dark. Lasso him, that's the thing, but no shootin', less'n you have to. Rest of us, we'll hit for the Brakes again. I just got to get them cattle back. But I'm dependin' on you to get that young devil."

Long after the men were out of sight, Bette stood gripping the window sill with white-knuckled fingers. They were going to get Phil! Phil, so full of life and daring to be in the confines of a cell. Phil in stripes, probably handcuffed! With every one against him that's what would happen, too!

"They're not going to do it!" she vowed, her face white and set. "I'll . . . I'll see him, warn him to get right away, out of the country!"

The next thing she knew, she was riding over the hills, lashing her horse toward the Ansco spread. In her dread for Phil, she had no thought of fear for herself. Only when she came within sight of the ranch buildings did caution swoop down upon her like a warning hand. Suddenly, a thousand eyes seemed to be watching from hidden places. Another terror thrust itself upon her. Suppose Phil himself should spot her from one of the windows, take her for an enemy?

Leaving her horse in a clump of cottonwoods, she slipped through them toward the back of the house. Concealed there, she waited, her heart thumping wildly. Suddenly, the door opened. Phil stepped out, a bulging sack on his shoulder. She was out in front of him before he saw her. The sack slid from his shoulder.

"What—where—" he gasped, his glance darting about.

"I'm alone," she panted. "I've come to . . . to warn you that they're laying for you, waiting to get you."

"Just who's going to get me?" he asked, smiling a little.

"Bart and Hank," she hurried on. "They got Whitey, and—"

"They got Whitey?" demanded Phil, his eyes sharpening upon her.

"Yes, and he's talked, told everything, that you're taking in supplies tonight. So Bart and Hank are going to lay for you where your trail goes into the Brakes. They say they'll have the cattle back, the cattle you—"

"The cattle I rustled from your father," finished Phil coolly.

She flinched at that. That he could be so calloused about it! But even with that thought, her eyes were taking him in. Suddenly, his nearness sent the blood stampeding furiously through her veins.

"Tell me," he was saying, his voice so singularly quiet she felt its hypnotic spell, "why did you come to warn me?"

She could not answer. She could only gaze into eyes bent upon her, eyes clear and blue, and filled with

a magnetic warmth. Then she felt herself swept to him, crushed in arms that held her as if they would never let her go. Breathless in that clasp, pain and terror went from her like magic. She felt the approach of his lips, and her face turned upward. Then his lips were upon hers, and her whole being quivered to the thrill of that impact.

In the heaven of those moments, pain, suspicion, bitterness, were swept away. For them there was no world, no past, no future. To Bette, nothing mattered except that she was in Phil's arms, loving him, because she couldn't help herself. A rustler, her father's bitter enemy, and the man she loved better than life!

Long and sweet was that kiss, the joy of it holding time at bay. Then came memory to taunt her with the realization that this must be the end, and she clung to Phil as if she would take in the last bit of joy while she could.

Panic struck her, sharp, swift. She lifted her red-gold head, her hazel eyes full of tragedy.

"Phil, you must go!" she cried. "Get away, get away at once! Promise me that you'll go away, out of the country! Get away from that rustler gang! Get away to some new place, begin again, go straight!"

A sob caught the end of her words. Very gently, Phil cupped her face with his hands, gazed down at her with a look that burned itself into her heart.

"Whatever I do, wherever I go, I'll never forget you," he breathed, his voice deep and vibrant.

One more kiss, then she was slipping blindly through the cottonwoods to her horse. Riding homeward, she knew with throbbing pain that never would she hear the sigh of the wind, smell the tangy scent of pine and sage, without her heart being torn with memories of this hour.

At home, she went into the house where the stillness had the air of death. Tim was asleep, and she went on to her own room, threw herself upon the bed. But she could not rest. Had Phil got away? That question seemed written on her heart.

The night was one long, torturing dread. Dawn found her wan, hollow-eyed, still waiting, watching. When at last she saw a single rider tearing over the hills, she turned deathly pale. It was Curly, one of their men. His horse was lathered, his arm in a sling. She hurried to meet him.

"Did they get him—Phil?" she asked, her lips stiff and dry.

"Don't reckon they did or they'd ha' brought him in," returned Curly, shifting his weight in the saddle. "But hell's sure a-poppin' in the Brakes," he went on. "Rustlers've got your dad an' the rest holed up in a box canyon."

"Dad, holed up!" gasped Bette.

"Yes. Had 'em there since yesterday. Trapped 'em, let 'em ride into that canyon, then closed 'em in there with guns at both end."

Bette stared at the man aghast. In her torturing anxiety about Phil, she had forgotten the danger to her father.

"Somebody hollered at 'em that nobody'd be hurt if they just stayed put, but if they tried makin' a break for it, they'd shoot 'em down like dogs," went on Curly. "Me, I was a little behind the rest, and I made a dive into a gulch and hid there. All night I didn't dare move, them rustlers right around me. This morning I made a break for it. One of 'em got me in the arm, but it's just a flesh wound. I'm ridin' right into town, see if I can get the sheriff."

He was riding off when he swung about, called back:

"Your dad must ha' got hit, too. Seen blood on his shoulder, quite a lot of it. But he was still a-goin'," he added, spurring his horse ahead.

Bette stood staring after him, her face white and stricken. Her father shot, wounded, closed up in that canyon without food, without medical aid! The next thing she knew, she was in the house telling Tim about it.

"How long do you suppose they'll be holed up there?" she demanded distractedly.

"Heaven knows," returned the old cowpoke, shaking his head.

"I'm going to dad," declared Bette, turning to the door.

"For gosh sake!" gasped Tim. "You can't! Them devils o' rustlers—you don't know what they'd do to you!"

"I'm going. I don't care if they shoot me down!" declared Bette, stamping her foot. "Dad, he looked all in before they even started yesterday. They've got no food, and him wounded. I've got to go!"

"You'd be crazy!" protested Tim. "Them rustlers'd as soon put a bullet through you as not!"

But Bette was already in the kitchen, packing supplies in frantic haste. The relief of action, of a definite worry! She would go mad just sitting, waiting. Phil—she could only hope and trust that he had got away. But she was going to her father, no matter what! She couldn't believe that even rustlers would refuse to allow her that. She would carry a white flag, the symbol of peace.

But in spite of all her determination, her heart was thumping madly as she rode into the Brakes, a white handkerchief fluttering from her hand. She had ridden for some distance when a shot pinged on a rock close beside her.

"Stick 'em up!" snarled a voice from a thicket, so close that she jumped, the flag falling from her hands as they lifted shakily.

"What you doin' here?" the voice demanded.

"I'm Bette Leeson, Jake Leeson's daughter," she managed to reply through chattering teeth.

"That don't help you none," was the rough retort. "What you want here?"

"I've brought food for my father and his men," she explained.

"Well, you just turn round and mosey back with it," ordered the man.

"Oh, please!" she pleaded, her voice breaking hysterically. "I'm not armed! Look! You can come and search me. I swear all I've got

are food and bandages. My father's wounded. If . . . if you'll just let me go to him, I'll . . . I'll stay with him till . . . till—"

"What's doin', Zeke?" broke in another voice, accompanied by the sound of approaching footsteps through the bushes.

"This dame, she claims she's Leeson's gal, wants to go in to him with food an' stuff," explained the first voice.

Above the pounding in her temples, Bette heard the two conferring in lowered tones, then the first speaker called to her gruffly:

"You can go in, but you got to stay there. And don't you forget this—bullets'll pop for you same as for the men if you try any funny work. Follow the trail. Third turn takes you into the canyon."

"Thank you," quavered Bette, hardly daring to believe her luck.

Lifting the reins in shaking hands, she rode on, counting the turns carefully. Around the third turn she entered a canyon, dark with walls and overhanging cliffs. A fire made a blaze in the gloom, and around it sat men in various attitudes of dejection. Against a rock, his face gray and drawn under his grizzled hair, sat her father. At sight of him the last of Bette's fortitude broke.

"Dad!" she screamed, and springing from her horse, she ran to him.

"Bette!" he gasped, catching her to him.

"Dad, you're safe, you're safe!" she sobbed. "Curly said you were shot!"

"My shoulder," he explained. "But how'd you ever get in here?" he wanted to know.

"They let me in when I promised to stay till . . . till— But let me fix your shoulder. I brought iodine and bandages," she said, running to her horse. "There's food, too."

"Food!" shouted the men. "Lead us to it!"

They were seated around the fire, eating ravenously, swilling down great cups of steaming coffee, when the hills and crags around them crashed to the roar of shots, to a bedlam of shouting voices, to the thunder of galloping hoofs. The men sprang to their feet, stood gazing at one another with wide, startled eyes. For a brief interval, it sounded as if a battle of artillery raged around them. Then, as abruptly as it had started, the sound of fighting died down, growing fainter, till the last echo had died, leaving silence.

"Help's come!" shouted Jake. "It's the sheriff or the rangers. Come on, boys. Let's get outta this damned hole!"

They sprang for their horses, swung into the saddles. But with the reins in their hands they halted, staring up the canyon. Riding toward them came the sheriff, before him two handcuffed men on horses, and beside him, straight and cool in the saddle, rode Phil Ansco! Bette clutched at her saddlehorn, a cold wave drenching her heart. Beside her her father was shouting exultantly:

"You got him, sheriff! You got him! We'll give him the pen, a good long term! We'll—"

But Bette, her heart pumping terror, drove her horse to Phil's side, swung about and faced her father with blazing eyes.

"You're not!" she cried stridently. "You're not putting him in the pen!"

Her father's astounded voice crashed in on her speech.

"Bette! You gone loco?" he gasped.

"No, I haven't!" she retorted, her voice choked and rasping. "But you're not putting him in the pen! Phil!" she cried, turning to the young man. "Why didn't you go away? Why did you let them get you?"

Phil started to speak, but like a roaring bull, Jake Leeson broke in:

"Bette, you come here to me. What the hell's come over you? Fightin' us all, the law, for him, a rustler! Why—"

"Because I love him!"

She flung the words at him proudly. Defiantly, she met the amazement of the faces around her.

"What?" shouted Jake. "You, a Leeson, love an Ansco, a rustler? Say, before I'd see you hitched to him I'd see you in your grave! I'll shut you up! I'll—"

Suddenly, as if words had failed him, his hand darted to his gun.

"Hold it, Jake!" snapped the sheriff. "Wait! Let me tell you this—you got Phil to thank for this cleanup!"

"Him?" gasped Jake. "Sheriff, you gone loco, too?"

"No, I haven't," was the terse reply. "But reckon he'd best explain things himself."

But before Phil could speak, a horseman came galloping down the canyon.

"Ranger," muttered the sheriff.

"We got 'em all, the rustlers," the ranger explained to Phil. "We're holding them ahead here. The cattle, too."

"Good." Phil smiled, then turned to face Jake.

"I came back branded with the name of rustler," he began. "I had you to thank for that. You made no bones about it either. You threw up that fence for the whole country to know what you thought of me."

"You tore it down! You rustled my cattle!" stuttered Jake. "You can't deny it. We got some of 'em, my brand on 'em that you hadn't had a chance to blot or—"

"Or you'd never have recognized them," finished Phil coolly, adding with a nod at the two prisoners, "The champion brand blotters of the whole Southwest."

"Phil ought to know," agreed the sheriff. "He's the sharpest brand inspector in the State."

"Brand inspector!" gasped Jake, echoed by others.

"That's my job," admitted Phil, showing his badge.

"Phil!" breathed Bette, putting out her hand, her face radiant.

Phil smiled, drew the hand under his arm.

"Brand blotting's interested me from a kid," he went on. "After I left home, I went after it strong. I worked with brand blotters till I could spot a changed brand on

sight. Then I got a job with the State. It was tracking these two fellows that brought me back here. I'd been on their trail quite a spell, but never could quite catch up with them. But a few months ago I spotted the Leeson brand in a bunch down close to the border, changed so you'd hardly know it. I grabbed the clue and hit for up here. Thanks to you, Leeson, the name you'd saddled me with, I got in with some rustlers operating in the Brakes."

"If you'd come to me—" sputtered Jake.

"And have you pump me full of lead?" Phil grinned. "No, you wouldn't have believed me. I was between the devil and the deep sea. These rustlers were a close-mouthed lot. I began to think the brand blotters had me fooled again, when I found out they operated by themselves in a closed canyon here, taking no chances. I staged that raid on you so they'd have to work so fast they couldn't be careful. Because I furnished them supplies I had a chance to watch them at work. Then I knew they were my men."

"That's when you wired me," put in the sheriff importantly.

"You and the rangers," agreed Phil. "I was all set for a grand cleanup when things began to pile up on me. When you got that yellow Whitey and he talked, I knew I had to wind things up quick or be dry-gulched by some of you. I had the rustlers hole you up here, pretending it was to give us a chance to get the cattle away, but really to give the sheriff and the rangers time to get here. I stuck right by these brand blotters. Couldn't afford to let 'em get away. You see, there's five thousand apiece on each of them."

"Five thousand apiece!" echoed voices enviously.

But Phil was not listening. For Bette's arms were around his neck and she was crying proudly:

"Oh, Phil! But the risk, the danger! Promise me that never again—"

With a single sweep, Phil lifted her into his arms.

"I was thinking"—he smiled in his gay, daring way—"that that ten thousand would start us up on the old spread again. That is, if you—"

But he had no need to ask. For Bette's lips were giving him her answer.

THE END.

THE LARIAT OF LOVE

Birth numbers and the stars above reveal your fate in life and love.

by Shawn Arlow

MAY - TAURUS - VENUS - NUMBER 5

HAPPINESS in life and love for the Taurus-Number 5 girl depends on how she uses her psychological horns, for, like a rose in the astrological garden of life, she has thorns; and that is why her sign is associated with the bull. But people love roses and people love the Taurus with the numerological influence of number 5, also a pronged symbol.

Thus, she must realize that she can hurt badly when not watching herself; consequently, it pays her well to develop poise. She is very capable, self-reliant and industrious. Of course, she can be gentle when unprovoked, but when crossed or opposed, it is easy for her to get as mad as a bull. The color red, which stands for anger and passion, also stands for danger—danger to her own happiness if she allows emotion to overcome her logic.

Life can be very glorious to her, even fortunate when the sky is blue; but as the clouds of adversity gather and thunder and lightning appear on the horizon, then she must keep control of herself in order to prevent that volcano of temper and indignation from pouring the lava of sarcasm upon loved ones.

The Taurus-Number 5 girl likes pleasure, and often she is selfish in acquiring that pleasure. It is easy for her to overlook the comfort of others who might not enjoy what she does. Whenever there is a question of mutual joy, she must try to cooperate; for in so doing she will find greater pleasure and, perhaps, joy in her sacrifice. There is no joy in the world like that of making others happy, especially those you love.

It is true that the Taurus girl cannot stand pain. While she can endure adversity when necessary to accomplishment, she goes to pieces when she has been hurt by mean words from the man she loves. But

she seldom seems to realize that her own mean words likewise bring pain to others. She has just a little too much of the queen in her make-up, and unless in childhood she learns the lesson of humility, she is likely to find many moments of heartache.

Usually she is talented, but as a rule she thinks her talent is that of a genius and it is hard for her to admit that others with that same talent might be even better qualified than she. Only when she learns that she is just one of many in the great assembly of humans, instead of being the royal leader, does she find real happiness.

She is best suited to positions which require some executive ability and moments of using her head. She is not given to monotonous routine, but fares better when there is variety or conditions that need quick thinking and meeting emergencies as they arise unexpectedly. She follows that same inclination in her love affairs. She falls in love quickly and does not need a long courtship to help her to make up her mind. In fact, she likes to be swept off her feet by an enthusiastic fiancé. She likes the drama of romance and she is happier with a husband who is an extrovert. She will never really appreciate a mate who lets her walk over him, or is too gentle with her.

She is a woman of power, not a clinging vine. There is usually acting ability born in her, but that doesn't mean she has to be an actress. The greatest actresses in the world are wives who use their ability in pleasing their greatest audiences, their husbands. It pays the best dividends in happiness.

Consider the Taurus wife who feels that her husband is not accomplishing as much as their neighbor, Mr. Smith, who recently was promoted in his concern. She feels that her husband should be made to realize that he is slipping. How can she do it? The poor actress might get sarcastic and say something like this: "I see that Ted Smith is going places, but of course *he* is clever. He really wants to make his wife happy—"

But what is her husband's reaction? He is hurt and any encouragement he might need is weakened by indifference and a feeling of what's-the-use. But the clever actress would say something like this: "John darling, you have more on the ball than Ted Smith. Don't let him step too far ahead. Just show him that *you* have what it takes to get places." Such a statement spurs him on to even better things, because his wife has confidence in him.

But it is so easy for the Taurus-Number 5 girl to kill the enthusiasm of one she loves. This is a trait she must guard against at all times, because no plant ever grew by being stepped on. Discouragement is a weed in any garden of human activity; while confidence is water to a struggling flower, and a smile is sunshine to fiancé or husband.

At all times the Taurus girl must exercise a high degree of self-control to stifle the tendency to

dominate her circle and those in it. Even her best friends dislike seeing her get her own way all the time. Even if she is lucky and usually on the winning side, it will pay her to admit she is wrong once in a while. The Taurus girl who can belittle herself will find friends rushing to defend her. Only recently the newspapers told of a certain Taurus lady who had won first prize in a guessing contest. She modestly admitted that it was all dumb luck even though she knew she had worked hard. But that modesty was the best thing she could have shown. Immediately her friends told her it wasn't luck, but that she deserved to win because she was clever. However, had she acted self-important about winning or had shown the least bit of conceit, those same friends would have been less demonstrative.

And likewise in love: She must not act as though she felt that her fiancé was lucky in winning her hand. She must make him feel that they both were lucky. What happiness many a Taurus girl loses by acting too self-important or holding delusions of grandeur! No matter how queenly she may feel inside, she must never show it, because no Taurus can ever find happiness without being gracious and considerate of others.

The stubbornness which makes the Taurus child difficult to her parents, should be overcome before she is sixteen, because her friends will not have the patience of her father and mother. When she refuses to go to the Academy Theater, because she wanted to go to the Ritz, she may find that her fiancé has taken another girl to the Academy. She must remember that the affection shown by her fiancé today, may be based on the girl he thinks she is, and that same affection may turn into rejection when he finds that the imaginary girl was sweeter than the real one. For no girl can be certain of the lasting quality of a man's love. It is only lasting when based on the real thing. Love is not a material thing which, when once possessed, becomes permanent property. It is a radiation, a light that can continue to illuminate the heart only so long as the current which supplies it, continues in force. So it behooves the Taurus-Number 5 girl to insulate herself against those things which can short-circuit affection, such as stubbornness, vanity, sarcasm and selfishness. With those things sublimated by clever acting, she can hold her popularity and adoration forever. Her love happiness is her own making, for as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, love will come to every Taurus girl. Those who lose it are at fault.

The Taurus girl, like golden ore,
Has precious qualities in store,
That Nature gave to her at birth,
If she can show the hidden worth.

She must refine it carefully,
So friends and loved ones only see
The beauty of the pure gold—
Then happiness is hers to hold.

The Taurus-Number 5 Man

The Taurus-Number 5 man has power and tenacity. He gets ahead if he uses his head. But he must

use it to help others and never to push them out of the way. Nature seems to have warned him against being bull-headed; and until he has passed the test of gentleness and consideration, Nature holds up the blessings she keeps in store for him. No Taurus has ever found real success and happiness without the aid of some loyal friend. He is not the self-made man; he makes his mark because he has put out his hand to assist and not to grasp. It is a law of life which no Taurus ever has been able to defy.

He is wise, intelligent, observing of human nature and has a sense of drama. Like the Taurus girl, he has acting ability. It was no wonder that Shakespeare was born under the sign of Taurus.

He makes a great commander for in that capacity he has the welfare of others at heart, and his gain is the gain of those he leads. In such a part he is at his best as demonstrated by such great generals as the Duke of Wellington and Ulysses S. Grant, both of Taurus. And to this we can add Robert E. Peary, General Mark W. Clark, Admiral Leahy, Archbishop Spellman, General Brehon Somervell. But, of course, the Taurus leadership can be negative when it takes on the god-complex of a Taurus like Hitler. Hitler only goes to prove the necessity of Taurus modesty and righteousness if his power is to be constructive. Selfishness and arrogance have never failed to carry the Taurus man downward.

Send this coupon to Romantic Range—Lariat of Love—122 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. Inclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. You will receive a personal BRAND OF FATE, showing your lucky star, lucky number and combination; also the names of the Western States most favorable to you, your lucky hour on the Clock of Romance, your fortunate hours, dates, months and years and your traits—also how to determine harmony between you and your sweetheart or friend and how to make your name lucky. Each BRAND OF FATE is personally prepared in accordance with your own birthdate.

May Issue, 1945 — Lariat of Love

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In the matter of love, Taurus dramatizes romance. He emanates sex appeal with a masculinity that all women like. A representative Taurus in that respect was Rudolph Valentino. The quality of love leadership is a natural gift. It is not always one of affection but respect. But, after all, the average girl cannot have real affection for a man she doesn't respect.

It is quite easy for the Taurus man to become discontented when he thinks he is not progressing in business or love. But before a Taurus man decides to run away, he had better study himself. Nine times out of ten he will find that he has been too critical of others, and the very assistance he needs has been lost because he hadn't encouraged it. Or maybe he hasn't been studying as much as he should have. He might have thought he knew it all, whereas had he endeavored to learn just a little more about his business or trade, he would have made a better impression. Or in the case of his sweetheart not being as fond of him as he expected, maybe she feels as he does—that he doesn't care enough for her. Most cases of self-pity have been caused by lack of self-analysis. And no Taurus can be too learned from the standpoint of education or psychology. Even genius has to be trained. Only talents are born in one, not the perfection of them. No surgeon is born a surgeon. And no Taurus is born a leader, only with leadership potentialities.

Nature demands great effort from the Taurus man. All her gifts to him are hidden. No man found gold without a hard struggle, both in the mining and in the refining. The lazy Taurus might as well become a hermit. His ship never comes all the way in by itself; it stays out in the harbor awaiting the Taurus to pilot it in.

The Taurus man should not expect his fiancée or wife to do the love-making. Still, a few Taurus men may expect a girl to shower them with attention just as a matter of course. Although such Taurus men are few and far between, the attitude may be traced back to the fact that the man, when a child, was spoiled by a mother who let the whole world know that she had a genius for a son. To such a Taurus let it be said: "Great men lift their eyes to the stars, they don't wait for the stars to fall at their feet. And he who would find the star of affection must lift his eyes and his heart unto it."

A stubborn child of Taurus who refuses a round cracker because he wants the moon, will only starve and find that the moon goes on without him. Nature changes no laws even for the Taurus. But once he overcomes the royal complex, he finds greater happiness in being the King's guard with all the girls of the court to choose from even if he can't have the princess who might not be so sweet, after all. The wise Taurus makes the most of his opportunities and of what he has. The wisdom of contentment with things as they are is a Taurus necessity. It is much better to climb in a contented state, than to struggle with

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anxiety in the heart. Breaks come to the happy Taurus and seldom to the tense one. Lady Luck likes a Taurus man who can smile and who carries a sense of sportsmanship in his heart, one who isn't afraid to lose as long as he has done his best. A poor loser is an unappealing Taurus.

There is nothing wishy-washy, of course, about a Taurus, but he is apt to become indifferent when he thinks that the breaks are going against him. But there is a law in nature that shows it is always darkest just before dawn. That same law makes itself felt in the life of the Taurus, especially in matters of love. Venus gives the Taurus-Number 5 man a great need for love. He is not a happy bachelor. But Venus has no arms and that is why all people under the Venus sign must use theirs in embracing Venus. She can't do it for them. Thus, when Taurus thinks he has not won a girl just because she hasn't reached for him with more enthusiasm, he is very unwise to let this get him down. But like the darkness before the dawn, the light of her smile will illuminate his heart if he will only take her in his arms and tell her he loves her. It isn't a risk to pride for a Taurus man to tell a girl he loves her even if he isn't sure she will answer "yes" to his proposal of marriage. It's a gamble, of course, but he has everything to gain. Many a Taurus man has lost a possible wife because he was too proud to take a chance on being refused.

All in all, the Taurus man has more charm than he sometimes believes. What if the breaks do seem against him? That very adversity is a test to see if he has the stuff to be worthy of the opportunity just around the corner of time. No general ever got to the top without demonstrating his ability as an officer in the ranks. And no Taurus will find nature rewarding him unless he has proved that he has developed the qualities he needs to live up to the new responsibility. So many people believe that success in life is purely luck. But if we could see the invisible lines of force around us in the cosmic world, we would realize that strength of character sends forth a radiation like lines of force from a magnet which invisibly attracts the metal of opportunity. Nature is wiser than men realize; she has eyes that see into the great invisibility of the psychic world and she is not fooled by false glitter of man-made radiance. Only the electrons in the cosmos of justice, far beyond the sight and comprehension of man, provide the current which lights the way to happiness in the life and love of a human being. It pays the Taurus to develop his sensitivity to these cosmic forces. Faith, hope and love are the best generators, and modesty is the best conductor.

The Taurus man, a king at heart,
Must never seek the royal part,
But be a noble common man,
And offer service where he can.

His heart must glow with friendly fire,
To win the fame of his desire.
And he must make true love his goal,
So he'll be loved for strength of soul.

What you do with your money can wreck you (*and your Uncle Sam*)

Buy, buy, buy! Foolish people are doing it, *over*doing it. But sensible folks know that with every needless purchase—or every time you patronize a black market or buy above ceiling—you do your bit to force prices up all along the line. That's the way inflation gets a boost.

It can happen here—again! Today, with fewer goods in the stores while incomes are high, the danger of inflation is greater than ever. Inflation is always followed by depression. What can you do to head off another depression? Buy nothing you do not really—*really*—have to have . . . today.

Save, save, save! That's the way to make America good for the boys to come home to. Pay up debts, put money in life insurance, savings bank, War Bonds. Every cent you save now helps to keep prices down—and when the war is won you'll have use for that nest egg you've laid away.

A home of your own, a better farm, a real vacation; something to retire on—these are things worth saving for. Store up your money now while prices are high. There's a time to splurge and a time to save: today, while money's coming in, is a good time—the *right* and patriotic time—to SAVE!

4 THINGS TO DO

To keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than ceiling prices. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask more for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.
4. *Save.* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can—to help pay for the war, protect *your own* future! Keep up your insurance.

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Offices of War Information; and published by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America

LET'S PLAY CHECKERS

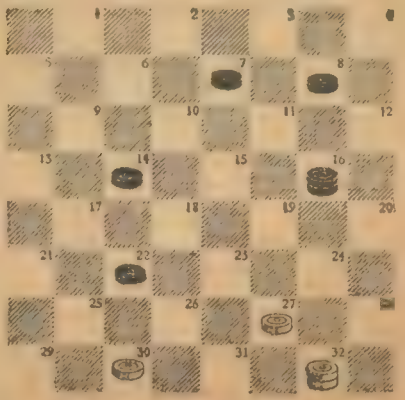
by Millard Hopper

World's Unrestricted Checker Champion

Millard Hopper is well known to the checker-playing world. He is the author of several books on the game and has given numerous exhibitions, sometimes playing as many as fifty opponents at one time. He is at present giving checker demonstrations at the various army camps and U. S. O. units, and has arranged with the editorial staff of Romantic Range to conduct a friendly checker department for the men in service as well as the folks at home.

I AM writing this installment aboard a New York Central express, bound for Westover Field, where we are scheduled to play at the hospital and again at the Officers' Club. I say "we" because I'm part of a troupe of eight entertainers which includes a dance team, a magician, two vocalists. an accompanist and an m.c.

Possibly you wonder how checkers can be dovetailed into a stage show of this kind, for, on the surface, the game may seem unexciting. However, as with so



White to move and win in three moves.

many things, the whole secret lies in the manner of presentation.

Checkers is a highly fascinating game, but, obviously, you can't expect to take an ordinary checkerboard onto an otherwise empty stage and entertain a large group of people. But by making a giant checkerboard which could be seen by everyone in the audience, by painting the checkers to represent the "Yanks" and the "Japs," we had a novel attraction that was bound to catch one's eye and arouse curiosity.

All that was needed, once we had the audience's attention, was to hold it, and that was a simple problem with the game so full of spectacular and startling plays. Selecting several of the most astonishing and by naming them with lively titles—the "Solomon Island Slam," etc.—we could show how the Yanks outsmarted the Japs on the checkerboard, and otherwise, too, of course.

It not alone amused the boys and drew plenty of laughs, but it proved instructive as well and gave them an insight into the trick plays of the game. That this interest was a sustaining one was proved when I played return engagements at several of the hospitals and learned that checkers had become one of the leading pastimes of the men in the wards and recreation halls.

In most places, on my return engagement, I would visit the wards and play with groups of men, the patients who were up, sitting at tables, while boards were arranged

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for the bed patients. And, surprising as it may seem, many of those fellows in bed played a much better game than the ones at the tables.

Perhaps some of our readers represent these very fellows I've been writing about, and possibly being in one or more of the hospitals which I have not as yet reached, might like to see one of these "Solomon Island" checker slams; if so, get hold of a checkerboard and checkers. Now set up the men in the positions shown in the diagram. Remember the White checkers represent the Yanks and it's up to you to move and win the game in just three moves.

White wins neatly in this setting by moving 30-26. Black jumps 22-31, then White moves 32-28, and after Black jumps again, White clears the board with his King. If you enjoyed that one, set up the following, which is based on the same idea.

No. 2—Black checkers on: 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 16; White checkers on: 21, 30, 27, King on 24. Once again, it's the White checkers that are to to move and win in five moves.

When you get this solved, why not set it up for some of those fellows in your ward who think they are checker champs and see if they can solve it. If they do, try this one on them:

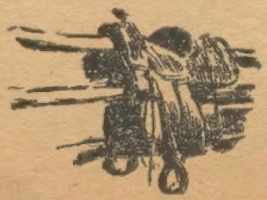
No. 3—Blacks on: 6, 7, 12, 15, 16, King on 14; Whites on: 24, 26, 29, 32, King on 30. White is to move and win five moves.

I'll bet that one will make them study for awhile.

And don't forget we will have some new ones just as startling in the next issue and some valuable hints on the best ways to start your checker game.

Incidentally, if you have any questions on the game, don't hesitate to write in to me in care of this magazine.

And now, the answers to those last two brain teasers. No. 2—White wins by 21-17, 13-22, 30-26, 22-31, 24-28, 31-24, and 28-19. No. 3—White wins by 24-19, 15-24 (if 16-23, White gets a 3 for 1 shot); after 15-24 White continues 32-27, Black jumps 24-31 and gets a King and White moves 30-25. When Black's King jumps out 31-22, White captures five men and blocks the remaining man on 12, winning neatly.



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